

Performing ‘Blackness’: The Appropriation of Commodified African-American Culture by South Asian youth in Britain

By

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Abstract

In recent years, African-American popular culture has been marketed for mass global consumption through music, film, television and fashion. Hip-hop culture and rap music has been at the forefront of this commodification process. The proliferation of these mass marketed forms coincided with the growing up of a generation of British Asian youth who lacked presence in the British media.

In this thesis the global sell of 'blackness' is examined alongside the structural position and visibility of South Asian youth in Britain. The cultural moment when the appropriation of African-American culture (and particularly hip-hop) by South Asian youth proliferated, is researched through in-depth interviews with participants who were growing up at the time. The ways in which 'black' codes were used, their investment in these and the effect on their identities at a subjective level is also examined. It is argued here that the use of 'black' codes by South Asian youth has led to an increased visibility of Asian youth and the reconfiguration of South Asian culture in Britain.

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Appendix 1

Appendix 2

1

Introduction

It was a new breed, just recently joining the ranks of the other street crews: Becks, B-boys, Indie kids, wide-boys, ravers, rude-boys, Acidheads, Sharons, Tracies, Kevs, Nation Brothers, Raggas and Pakis; manifesting itself as a kind of cultural mongrel of the last three categories. Raggastanis spoke a strange mix of Jamaican patois, Bengali, Gujerati and English. Their ethos, their manifesto, if it could be called that, was equally a hybrid thing: Allah *featured*, but more as a collective big brother than a supreme being, a hard-as-fuck *geezer* who would fight in their corner if necessary; Kung Fu and the works of Bruce Lee were also central to the philosophy; added to this was a smattering of Black Power (as embodied by the album *Fear of a Black Planet*, Public Enemy); but mainly their mission was to put the Invincible back into Indian, the Bad-aaaass back in Bengali, the P-Funk back in Pakistani.

'White Teeth'
Zadie Smith (2000)

1.1 Introduction

This work is an exploration into the influence of Black American culture upon, and its appropriation by, South Asian youth in Britain, to create a specifically recognisable south Asian identity in Britain.

Within the first part of this chapter, 'Background', I detail the phenomenon with which this work is concerned and how I came to research it. I outline the way in which the direction of the research was reconfigured. An explanation of the process by which I arrived at this research was necessary as these slowly developed insights are part and parcel of research work. I feel it is important to air them as they portray the reality of the process, in all its complexity.

Although this is an examination of a specific phenomenon traceable to a specific time, it is located at the intersection of many theoretical angles. The interdisciplinary nature of the subject is what drew me to cultural studies, and I have tried to retain that within this thesis. I have drawn on a range of work, from small-scale studies of localised youth cultures, including my own research, to broader examinations of the mediation of African-American culture, and its sale for global consumption. The theoretical basis for this study is located amongst a range of texts examining class, race, theories on consumption and works on identity. These are outlined in the second half of this chapter, 'theoretical framework'.

1.2 Background

In the late 1980's to early 90's, in parts of Britain, a distinctive style began to emerge amongst South Asian youth, notably in cities such as London, Birmingham and Bradford.

The style consisted of an urban uniform of a puffa jacket, branded clothing and baseball cap, often with an X emblazoned across it. It was not just the hip-hop uniform that was adopted but also the language. A slang emerged with a little Jamaican and some Hindi terms, which were later supplemented with Americanisms which came across the Atlantic from MTV, rap music, and shows like 'The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air'.

Other parts of the culture less frequently adopted include DJ-ing, graffiti, drugs, car culture and politics. In urban centres, Asian youth began to be increasingly visible. Groups of young males driving around in cars blasting out hip-hop or walking down certain streets with that special swagger, talking the lingo, mimicing the gestures.

Although this is something of a caricature, I hope it serves to illustrate the phenomenon to which I refer. At this stage, it may come to mind that white youth too have been drawn to hip-hop with its hyper-mediated narratives of black masculinity, and possibly in larger numbers. However, there is a difference; as I go on to argue, Asian youth have incorporated it as their own to create a specifically Asian youth culture in Britain.

Within this work I try to understand the impact that a global commodification of African-American culture has had; but specifically I examine the impact it's had on South Asian youth culture in Britain. I explore some of the issues around its consumption and appropriation by South Asian youth, but also examine the investments that were made in it by individuals during their adolescence, and the ways in which it has shaped their identities. Finally, I try to extrapolate what this has meant for the development of South Asian youth culture in Britain.

I initially became interested in researching this as there was something about the appropriation, and its performance, that I felt I immediately understood yet could not unravel. There seemed to be a new and interesting thing happening within Asian youth

culture, and as a British South Asian researcher, I wanted to understand it. I began a dissertation on this topic during my undergraduate degree, and decided to continue to look at this through my postgraduate research to develop further insight. Other personal reasons also initiated this exploration. I found whilst attending a mostly white school with a small but growing South Asian student body, that the performance of a group identity by Asian youth using black codes, was not viewed as such. Rather, it appeared to me that staff and students accepted this as part of an overall 'ethnic' minority culture. Later, a wider appropriation of black codes was taking place around the time of the release of Spike Lee's 'Malcolm X'. These events raised a number of questions in my mind. Why were Asian youth adopting black codes? What investment did they make in it?

When I began my research, the use of black codes by young South Asians had hardly been remarked upon in academic work, except for a few scattered references (Hewitt, 1986, Gilroy, 1993, Back, 1994). It was therefore, scarcely noticed that some young South Asians had disproportionately taken up the overarching popularity of American (in particular black American) culture, at times to such an extent that it seemed adapted as their own. However, the phenomenon has subsequently had greater exposure, which impacted on the direction of this research, as I explain below.

1.2.1 Change of Direction

Cultures change; partly as a result of this self-awareness and partly because it is what cultural phenomena do, I find that some of the things I began investigating, are no longer as contemporary or perhaps as resonant. In recent years, I have noticed that the use of Black American codes has begun to be remarked upon, in academic work and the

media (Alexander, 2000; Back, 1996; Gilroy, 1993). There has been a broader exposure of Asian Youth culture on British media. The popular BBC comedy sketch show, 'Goodness Gracious Me', has featured a regular sketch about a couple of male teenage characters who perform a stereotype of Black street style and slang. The resemblance of the popular comedy character Ali G to Asian street culture has not gone unnoticed either¹. The recent publishing phenomenon that was Zadie Smith's first novel, 'White Teeth' features Asian youths adopting black codes and styles. These exposures, each for the purposes of comedy, showed that the adoption of black codes by Asian youth was not only noticed, but also utilised in a range of media texts for the purposes of parody. The awareness that existed amongst Asian youth interviewed when I began my research, had now spread into the community and beyond, to texts which, if not mainstream, were very popular.

A sense of self awareness exists among many young Asian people where they make use of black codes. The 'cultural moment' within which the appropriation of black codes visibly proliferated has passed. This self-awareness also changed the ways in which black codes were appropriated; at a low-level they were normalised, filtered through and dissipated into a mainstream South Asian youth culture. At another level and at other times, the use of black codes became 'ironic'. The early phases of my research now seemed imbued with this new exposure. Potential interviewees were keen to distance themselves from the suggestion that they were adopting black styles. Aside from this difficulty in how to broach the nature of my research with interviewees, in a way that did not discourage them, I was also beginning to have concerns that the phenomenon I set out to examine was no longer current. The young people I encountered were more likely to be listening to UK Garage rather than rap. Although the American influence was

still present within this section of Asian youth culture, it had dissipated so that forms of Asian music, such as Bhangra, were embraced more, and the popularity of black British music was also rising. There was no choice but to re-examine my motives and my approach.

Motives, I will discuss later in methodology; as for the approach, I saw my options as being one of two. Initially, I was drawn to the idea of monitoring changes in Asian youth culture and following them, as I was convinced I could find much of value to raise within that. However, I decided against this, as I believed there was a value in continuing to examine the appropriation of black codes by Asian youth. Even though its influence had waned, the ways in which hip-hop had contributed to the reformation of South Asian youth cultures was significant, particularly in the ways in which it made south Asian youth visible. Therefore, I have decided to present it as a cultural moment that had been significant in the development of Asian youth culture in Britain, as it is a way of maintaining an examination of the phenomenon, and at the same time acknowledging that it was waning, was to see it as and something that had led to its increasing exposure. This entailed viewing the phenomenon as recent past and a change in my field work so that I interviewed older people who had grown up living through this cultural moment. Further detail of this is provided in chapter 2, Methodology.

1.3 Theoretical Context

Here, I hope to briefly outline some of the theoretical ideas that inform this work; a more detailed engagement takes place with them later. Rather than create a standalone literature review, I have incorporated most of the work in to chapters alongside the data

and analysis. I favour it as an *active* way of using what I have learnt through reading and textual analysis.

Before I go on, I need to explain certain terms that are used in this work. I refer to the use of 'black codes' by Asian youth as well as 'blackness' throughout the thesis. I use the term 'code' in the way developed by semiotics to suggest the way certain linguistic terms as well as certain gestures have come to be associated with blackness. Following Herman Gray and others, I use 'Blackness' to refer to "the constellation of productions, histories, images, representations and meanings associated with black presence" in the United states and Britain (Gray, 1995:12). I also discuss 'performance' of identity. This draws on a postmodern understanding of identity which brings to the fore for the ways in which aspects of identity previously seen as fixed such as 'gender' and 'ethnicity' are performed. That is to say, that through socialisation we learn to adopt these roles at a subconscious level. At a less central level, specific modes of being come into effect in certain contexts; therefore, I am using the term performed to indicate the way in which 'black codes' are used to display a mode of being by Asian youth.

1.3.1 Asian youth culture

There was a palpable lack of work on South Asian culture when I began researching this phenomenon. The work that existed was often an appendage to a larger work within the framework of 'black' youth culture; however, recently, works such as 'Dis-orienting rhythms' (Sharma, Hutnyk, Sharma, 1996) and 'Cartographies of Diaspora' (Brah, 1996), have emerged. There is research emerging that places young south Asians at the ethnographic fieldwork level, (Gillespie, 1995; Alexander, 2000; Rattansi and Westwood, 1994; O'Donnell & Sharpe, 2000). In this thesis, I hope to engage with this growing body of work.

1.3.2 The local and the global

This research can be seen to have two dimensions; the local and the global. Globally, it is an examination of commodified African-American popular culture. This involves a study of how African-American culture is consumed globally in general but draws on specific examples from European countries such as France and Germany as well the research conducted in parts of Britain, including my own. This leads to an examination of the particular investments that are made in African-American culture -or at least its commodified forms- that result in its immense popularity.

Locally the research is concerned with the investments that many young South Asians have made, and continue to make, in popular African-American culture. Young Asians' keen interest in Black British culture has been noted before (Hewitt 1986, Gilroy 1993), but the use of Black American culture specifically, was not recognised until recently, and then only as observational asides within a different project. Although there is more proximity between Black British and South Asian communities, the exposure to African-American culture is greater, and certainly it is more available for consumption. Therefore, a critical appraisal of theories of consumption and the commodification of cultures forms a large part of my work.

It is important to examine the significance of theoretical writings on consumption because in an age of decreased manufacturing in the west and less fixed unemployment we are said to be increasingly defined by our patterns of consumption. Consumption is examined in the context of the commodification of African-American culture in chapter three and the ways in which facets of it were used by Asian youth I interviewed, in chapter five. Since the 1950's theorists have argued the increasing significance of consumerism in defining our everyday lives. Theorists such as Baudrillard, have argued

that consumerism is overtaking class and production in defining our sense of selves. Works such as Lury's 'Consumer Culture' (2001) as well as Studies such as like Hebdidge's 'Subculture: the meaning of Style' (1988) examine the ways in which consumer culture has become central to modern life. Young people in particular are at an age when they often have financial means and greater choice about the products they consume, but are not fully active in the labour market, so they can be said to be defined more through their consumption patterns than adults. In an age when 'off-the-peg' lifestyles are easily (and sometimes not so easily) purchased, it is important to examine the consumer choices that certain young people are making, as through their material and cultural consumption and production, they are also constructing new forms of identity (Gillespie, 1995:2).

1.3.3 'New Ethnicities'

This work engages critically with the 'new ethnicities' project first set out by Stuart Hall in the eighties and then followed through in a number of research studies.

The term 'new ethnicities' appeared in a 1982 article by Stuart Hall about the development of black cultural politics. In this, he argued for a return to ethnicity as a tool for analysis. However, it was not in the same sense as a return to roots. He argued that 'new ethnicities' were now emerging, within the context of Britain. This could be seen in the work being produced by minority groups that challenged commonly held representations about them, whether in film, photography or art. Hall elaborated on this idea later in an article entitled 'Culture, Identity and Diaspora'. He argued the need for a return to ethnicity (as opposed to race) because

The term ethnicity acknowledges the place of history, language and culture in the construction of subjectivity and identity, as well as the fact that all discourse is placed, positioned, situated, and all knowledge is contextual. **[Hall, 1996:442].**

This is pivotal to my research because it was in the context of the mass-marketing of African-American culture that a new formation of South Asian youth identities in Britain took place. Therefore, the borrowing from other cultures, to create a new South Asian identity in Britain, underpins this work. The ways in which these identities were constructed is examined in chapter 5.

A 'new politics of difference' (West, 1993) is said to have emerged in which we all understand each other through differences, rather than the political unity of a previous time, but not much work has been done on how this difference is sometimes delineated through borrowing and mixing from other cultures.

Some of the research studies that were influenced by the new ethnicities project were Marie Gillespies' 'Television, Ethnicity and Cultural Change'; Simon Jones 'Black Youth, white culture'; David Parker's 'Through Different Eyes' and finally, Les Back's 'New Ethnicities and Urban Culture: Racism and Multiculture in Young Lives'. The research carried out in these books was conducted amongst the second and third generations of migrants from the post war diasporas to Britain with a focus on youth in particular, and are therefore highly relevant to this work, as they address the ways in which new forms of identity are being created amongst ethnic minority youth.

Gilroy has argued that youth culture can have "a special role in mediating both the racial identities that are freely chosen and the oppressive affects of racism" (Gilroy, 1993:61) and this might be a factor in the construction of certain appropriations made by young South Asians.

Because 'new ethnicities' are said to be a result of hybrid identities between British-born youth of parents that migrated to Britain, a framework based around space or locality is often used in 'new ethnicities' work. Much of the 'new ethnicities' work has been heavily

rooted in a local community, whilst focusing on diasporic youth.

1.3.4 Diaspora

The work on diaspora, which I discuss next, tries to encompass both the local and the global. I believe that the concept of diaspora has something to offer to the research I am carrying out for the following reasons. Firstly, it is an examination of the appropriation of a globally marketed culture by groups of people in particular localities. The meeting of the local and the global tends to be an element within most examinations of diasporas as it is frequently observed that “diasporic identities are at once local and global” (Brah, 1996:196). Secondly, the validity of acknowledging experience seems to form a large part of understanding diasporas, so the formation of diasporic subjectivities is as important a part of developing ways of analysing diaspora as the study of patterns of global movement.

The research involves the meeting of two different diasporas, the South Asian and the African diaspora, to throw new light on our understanding of young South Asian Identities. As Brah makes clear in her discussion of ‘dio-synchronic relationality’ (Brah, 1996:190); the study of a diasporic population has to be examined with reference to other diasporas as well as to the indigenous populations of the country. The concept of diaspora is located within this body of work on race and ethnicities as well as a whole host of debates about globalisation. It implies that like economic phenomena, social phenomena too must be analysed with a trans-national focus.

Because the concept of diaspora has been over-used recently, and also because it is an under theorised subject, there is a sharp edge missing from a lot of the work in the field. This is due to a lack of empirical research (Parker, 1995:39) to feed into theory and then back into the social research; the process which stops ideas from stagnating. For

example important works like Paul Gilroy's 'The black Atlantic', Cohen's 'Global Diasporas' and Brah's 'Cartographies of Diaspora' as well as the theoretical writings of Homi Bhabha and Stuart Hall contain a good overview but shy away from developing new trans-national concepts as tools of analysis; this can also lead to statements such as the following by Cohen,

In previous eras and still in some places, when periods of febrile nation-building take place, their cosmopolitanism was a distinct disadvantage and a source of suspicion **[Cohen, 1997:168]**

Cohen speaks of disadvantaged diasporic people in the past sense. Research suggests that in these global cities diasporic people are amongst the lowest paid, working part-time in the poorly paid catering industry. They are often the least advantaged when it comes to rights and privilegesⁱⁱ. This is a good example of an instance when research would have been of benefit. I hope to make this research useful by providing a small amount of empirical research that will contribute to this field.

One of the criticisms made of the work on diasporas in cultural studies is that economical factors are rarely examined (Parker, 1995; Chrisman, 1997). By implication, diasporic identities are shaped only through culture, resulting in an overemphasis on creative consumption and work which-

Jettisons any economic analysis of black cultures or social movements. This is, I think, regrettable, and it is also an irony, given that black music and other recreational activities like sport are exactly the media most traditionally subject to mass commodification. **[Chrisman, 1997:54]**

This was a possible danger within my own research, and so I have attempted to root analysis within an economical understanding as well to locate historically any consumption that I talk about.

1.3.5 Sub-cultural Theory

I believe that due to the critical approach I am taking to recent theoretical works on youth, this research would benefit from revisiting this early sub-cultures work. The early sub-cultural theories have been criticised for creating celebratory accounts of youth cultures and producing reified accounts of 'authentic' cultures separate from media (Thornton, 1995), which is no longer viable, if it ever was. Much of the recent work within cultural studies on youth has taken a post-modern slant. This is because, as Willis (1990) has explained the strongly distinct youth subcultures they wrote about no longer exist. Rather, youth cultures have dissipated and have become much more 'incorporated' into mainstream forms of consumption.

Another aspect of this postmodern slant is that concepts of 'race' and 'identity' have been destabilised and viewed as much more contingent. Furthermore, theories of 'hybridity' have ensured a focus on the diverse nature of youth identities as can be seen in the new ethnicities work of the 1980s and early 1990's (Alexander, 2000; Mac an Ghail, 1999). However the development of this later work leaves out certain crucial factors that were taken much more account of in the 1970's work on youth subcultures. Works such as Paul Willis's 'Learning to Labour' (1977) and John Clarke's 'Skinheads and the Study of Youth Culture' (1973) have ensured an importance that was placed on economics, and an examination of how this subculture, or this practice fits into broader structure. Despite the dates, the early subculture work is useful for advancing arguments of youth consumption.

1.3.6 Identity

Finally, at the heart of this thesis is a preoccupation with identity. Cultural theories of

late have tended to view identity in two main ways. The older, more traditional view, has seen identity as unified and coherent based on fixed modes of gender, race and class. A more recent view, developed through cultural studies work in the late 80's and early 90's, sees identity as always "in process" (Hall, 1991: 47). "The logic of identity is, for good or ill, finished" (Hall, 1991: 43) as Hall declaratively states. The continuous process of identity formation is seen to be informed by an endless number of factors, including the consumer choices that we, as individuals, make.

Laclau and Mouffe (1985) poststructuralist critics of Marxism, have written about the convergence of social life drawing on Foucault's work. They believe that as part of a reaction to mass communication and an increasing homogenization of cultural life there has been a tendency towards the valorization of 'differences', and the creation of new identities that tend to privilege cultural criteria such as clothes, music and language. If this the case, then the ways in which the creation of these new identities come into being needs examination.

1.4 Conclusion

The above account detailed the theoretical context this research operates within, as well as an introduction to some of the literature I use; parts of this literature have also informed the direction of my methodological approach, as detailed in the following chapter. The convergence of theory and research places this work at the intersection of local level qualitative fieldwork and a 'global' level examination of commercial cultures and structural factors in the lives of Asian youth. These are brought together in an examination of the 'cultural moment' when South Asian youth borrowed black expressive forms to recreate Asian youth cultures in Britain.

ⁱ Sasha Baron-Cohen first began to perform this character as a small sketch within another show, but the popularity of the character has propelled him to his own show, the admiration of a broad base of fans including Madonna, and broadsheet column inches devoted to the analysis of his character. Some of this attention has been with regard to the ethnicity of the character he portrays.

ⁱⁱ See frequently cited examples of discrimination and disadvantage in housing, unemployment over representation in part-time and home work with little employment rights as well as the decreasing rights of Asylum Seekers, Refs. Examples of studies include PSI survey, 1982, Jones, 1993, Braham et al., 1992 Rex and Moore, 1969, Ginsburg, 1992.

2

Methodology

“The gulf between books and experience,” intoned Samad solemnly, “is a lonely ocean.”

‘White Teeth’
Zadie Smith (2000)

2.1 Introduction

An examination of the appropriation of African-American mediated culture by Asian youth in Britain needs to take into account the views of Asian youth themselves. Details of how black codes are accessed through various media as well as the *meanings* given to their use need to be ascertained through Asian youth who were growing up through the time when the use of these codes proliferated.

The methodology devised to carry out this research has altered considerably during the course of the project. As explained in the previous chapter, the focus has shifted; in accordance with this, the research has been reframed and new participants sought. The present methodology, and the subsequent changes made to it are in *Methods* detailed below. The ethical issues surrounding the execution of the research, as well as my views on the research process itself, are also discussed in *Research Issues*.

2.2 Methods

Once the direction of my research changed, I made the decision to conduct research with an older age range of people, who were able to reflect back on their adolescence and could comment on the influence of African-American codes on the development of their identity, as well as South Asian youth culture in general. The overall approach became qualitative. Qualitative methodology allows me to answer the important question of 'why' (Bell, 1987) such an appropriation took place. It also allowed me to ascertain the

subjective meanings that people give to their consumption choices. Undoubtedly, practical considerations were a factor in taking me in this methodological direction. My 'choice' of qualitative methodology was influenced by my position as a lone student researcher without the means to carry out large-scale national surveys.

Therefore, the present methodology consists of the following:

- In-depth interviews with adults aged between 21 And 28
- Non-participant observation

2.2.1 Interviews

The interviews, which form the bulk of my primary research, were in-depth and semi-structured. I decided that individual interviews would give me a range of stories rather than a group interview situation where one would be created through consensus. The interview questions were formed from a set of statements about what I wanted to discover; therefore, they were fairly thorough. For these reasons, I found this set of interviews worked well as they were clearly designed, with outlined goals. I did find however, that there were issues I had not thought to address in the interviews, and I attempted to address these as they arose.

My overall aim for the interviews was to discover the influence of black American cultural forms on the interviewees. Within that, there were several objectives.

2.2.2 Objectives

The first objective was to discover how the participants became involved in the consumption of African-American culture. To this end I aimed to discover

which aspects of Black American culture attracted them in the first place, their involvement in Black American cultural forms and how the interviewees appropriated Black American cultural forms. I also aimed to find out what they felt they had gained (or lost) from their interest in Black American culture and how their involvement with consumption of Black American cultural forms changed over time, and across situations, if at all and to discover how it affected the interviewee's sense of self. Finally, I hoped to contextualise this within their wider patterns of consumption and locate the interviewee's responses within a wider appropriation of African American culture by young South Asians, which I also sought their opinions about. The questions I developed to meet these aims and objectives are attached as appendix 2.

The interview questions required a degree of structure, as I was asking the research participants to comment on aspects of their lives that they had not necessarily narrated before, and to consider issues that they might not have previously considered or viewed as important. Therefore, a structure was both helpful for them and facilitated the interview process for me. It was not designed to limit what the interviewees spoke about, but to help shape their narrative¹. However, within that structure, and sometimes outside it, the discussions were not limited, but characterised by their range and scope.

The interviews took place with adults aged between 22 and 28. This age range was chosen because I wished to speak to people who had been part of this shift, where exposure to US media depictions of African-American culture became targeted at young people, and where Asian youth styles began to

visibly borrow from these new forms. I identified that period as being between 1987-1994 approximately, and therefore chose to interview people who would have been experiencing adolescence at that time. This period was identified from previous research I had conducted with Asian youth who appropriated black cultural codes, as well as experience and a degree of knowledge of popular culture and the ways in which factors such as the growth of Satellite and the popularity of rap music and African-American themed films led to a proliferation of 'black' codes available for adoption. This was reinforced by the literature I read on African-American culture and commodification. (See chapter 3).

The participants were chosen through informal contacts, and they themselves occasionally put me in touch with other people they knew (snowball sampling, if you will). This was practically beneficial in that it allowed me to overcome difficulties in finding participants. It was also beneficial for the research, as an 'acquaintance' status implied a degree of trust already. Through these contacts I interviewed nine participants in total. I interviewed each participant once, though sometimes they were contacted afterwards to clarify points. Their basic demographic details are listed below and further detail about each interviewee is provided in outline in Appendix 1.

Interviewee	Age	Gender	Background
	24	Female	Hindu Punjabi
	26	Male	Muslim Pakistani
	28	Male	Sikh Punjabi
	22	Female	Muslim Kashmiri
	27	Male	Sikh/Hindu Punjabi
	22	Female	Hindu Gujarati
	23	Male	Hindu Gujarati
	21	Male	Muslim Bangladeshi
	21	Male	Muslim Pakistani

The interviewees are from a range of Asian backgrounds; I chose more males than females, as masculinities is one of the issues featured within this research; connected to this, males were far more likely to be consumers of rap and hip-hop, so they were easier to find. The class background of the interviewees was not ascertained; this is partly because many of the tools for measuring class did not apply to the young Asian people I spoke toⁱⁱ. Although class related issues are discussed as they arise, (for example, in the context of deprived neighbourhoods), I chose not to categorise the interviewees according to class.

The length of the interviews depended on the individual interviewees, so ranged from 40 minutes to three and a half hours. The interviews conducted were recorded and transcribed wherever possible. The advantage of this was that it allowed me to listen more carefully and participate fully in the

interaction, guide the direction of the interviews and pursue important points. Crucially, it also allowed me to observe the gestures and expressions that act as vital qualifiers in verbal communication. Furthermore, although I found transcribing to be a time-consuming and painfully boring activity, it allowed me to familiarise myself with the data, and gave me an opportunity to begin identifying themes, making comments in the margins as I wrote.

The in-depth nature of one-to-one interviews allowed me to make personal bonds with the interviewees and therefore engendered more of an investment in the topics being discussed and strengthened a commitment to record and edit as faithfully as I could.

2.2.3 Observation

Observation was conducted to establish the ways in which black American culture influences the public 'presentation of self' (Goffman 1971). Through observation, I hoped to examine the ways in which the products and codes of mediated African-American culture were used, and displayed to perform 'Asian' identities in public spaces. It completed the picture by providing me with data that would not otherwise be accessible to me. The observation was carried out in key sites around Birmingham City centre, the areas of Lozells and Aston in Birmingham and, as part of my previous research, observation was also carried out in two areas of Bradford: Manningham and Ilkley.

Through observation, I looked at clothes, accessories and the conspicuous consumption of certain products and labels. I could also observe the ways in which people postured or displayed themselves, as well as gestures and modes of behaviour. It was important to locate these within a set of

practices amongst South Asian youth and make connections where possible between the modes of display I observed and those prevalent within mediated forms of African-American culture.

Within these key sites, I was keen to maintain a reflexive approach and foreground my position rather than slip into the position of the invisible researcher, which is easy to do, particularly with observation. I noted my position in the research site, as well as my position in terms of any impact I had on the interaction taking place. Details of location, such as the size, space and general description of the sites were recorded. The people I observed were viewed in the context of any other groups or individuals present. The presence of official bodies, signs and symbols were observed. All of these were noted before, after or during the process of the observation.

2.2.4 Data Analysis

The means of analysis I am using is similar to what sociologists have called 'analytic induction', which has been described as a process that

"generalises by abstracting. It abstracts from a given concrete case, the features that are essential, and generalises them" **[Znaniecki, 1934]**.

A similar process to this is use in much cultural studies research work with less of a focus on the generalisation. This is because a lot of the qualitative approaches taken do not lend themselves to generalisation. Rather, they indicate patterns which are tentatively pulled out. I do not want to generalise wholesale about Asian youth; however, I hope to use the narratives of the interviewees and make connections between them and broader patterns within Asian youth culture and within the commercialisation of African-

American culture ascertained from literature and other research.

The interviews were structured in a way that allowed interviewees the opportunity to narrate their responses in a chronological fashionⁱⁱⁱ. This, however, served as a tool to facilitate the interview process more than it operated as an analytical device. Analysis was carried out enabling the themes explored in interviews to be examined across the set of interviews and alongside the observation data and theoretical reading. At times, the ways in which an interviewee presented an incident or anecdote became significant in highlighting research issues as much as the content of speech. Besides this, the contexts in which the interviews took place, were made note of to contribute to an understanding of the interview performance, and used within analysis, as I agree with David Walsh that an “ethnographic analysis of interviews should focus on the context in which the interview occurred” (Walsh 1998:227) (See Appendix 1 for contextual information).

The individual and personal experiences related to me were helpful in determining the extent to which they correlated with broader perceptions of the phenomenon.

2.3 Research Issues

2.3.1 The role of the Researcher

The difficult subject of emerging identities cannot be researched nor conveyed through questionnaire or mere interviews and this has led to the application of various ethnographic methods. These methods bring with them some of the baggage from the old style of anthropology when communities

were constructed and generalised about by researchers who viewed them from their own subjective frameworks whilst playing the role of the 'objective' researcher. Then, newer frameworks for understanding the role of the researcher emerged, although they did not totally supersede this kind of work (Dudrah, 2000).

As this research shares some of the objectives of the new ethnicities work that emerged in the eighties and nineties, I examined the methodology used in key studies, and its theoretical grounding, to inform my work.

'New ethnicities' is the start of "the politics of living identity through difference" (Hall, 1991b: 53). This difference comes about through a realisation that we are all 'positioned' (Hall, 1996:442). This has led to researchers of new ethnicities and hybridity foregrounding their position as part of the research process (Back 1995). I tried to maintain an awareness of my position to the research, as well as that of research participants, and crucial considering my concerns about reified knowledge, the reader's position was also considered (see section below on 'The Anthropological Gaze').

Many researchers of 'new ethnicities' would agree that once one is talking about identity formation, it is necessary to convey the voice of the research participants as much as is possible within a study edited and controlled by the researcher.

Lest we forget, the way that 'new ethnicities' work talks of subjectivities is within a cultural studies framework. As Joseph Gripsrud has pointed out

"The construction of cultural identity is always an intellectual enterprise. Ordinary folks normally don't care very much. Intellectuals as a rule have a hard time convincing people about the relevance of these identity constructions" **[Gripsrud, 1994:220]**.

This is at odds with the claims to inclusiveness made by many researching in the field of 'new ethnicities'. A consideration for the perceptions of the participants and the need to put their voice across is expressed, when fundamentally, they are interpreting the words and actions of their participants through academic frameworks. In this field this is a cultural studies framework of hybrid identities that are continually in production, when the common sense perception is to view identity as coherent.

"In short, all constructions of cultural identities call for, if not refusal, deep scepticism." **[Gripsrud, 1994:230]**

Although this is perhaps an overly cynical position, it is none the less important to bear in mind that in talking about particular identities, researchers situate them, and through situating them construct them to an extent. However, this seems unavoidable and the best that can be done is to be on guard for works that try to unify identities, or uncritically celebrate particular identities.

Theoretical viewpoints on identity have shifted in recent times from a unified, monolithic model to one, which sees identity as fluctuating and negotiated in different situations and settings. Through the course of interviews, there was a redefinition of my identity, in a literal sense. Seeing, through these interviews, the different ways in which people negotiate an Asian identity made me reflect on my self and the ways in which I narrate my Asian identity to myself and to others.

My position as a researcher is not readily defined but has to be made explicit

within the research. As a young South Asian woman interviewing fellow South Asians I am an 'insider' with regards to the research participants to some extent, and this may have some advantages in that information that would not be made available to a non-Asian researcher may be made available to me. However, 'Asian' is a constructed category^{iv}; as an Indian Gujarati female, I may be more of an outsider with a Bengali male than a Gujarati female; and at times in interviews this became less pertinent than music enjoyed or the sense of humour shared.

Not only that, there is no readily defined group which consists of 'South Asian youth who appropriate African-American culture', and I am bearing in mind the dangers of constructing the participants of my research as a group or a subculture. I therefore try to focus on the moment and reflect on how it affected the identity construction process of research participant.

Youth subcultures must also be recognised as internally diverse due to the variety of social positionings and experiences held by different individual members outside the confines of a group. **[Hodkinson 1997:18]**

As a researcher, the most important thing here is to avoid complacency and try to maintain (and record) my position to the participants as I see it, at any given moment.

2.3.2 The Anthropological Gaze

Cultural studies' partial origins in anthropology impact upon research practice heavily, especially in the tendency towards qualitative and ethnographic research. However, as Murdock points out, what underpins interpretative work is

The romantic sensibility underpinning interpretative work finds its fullest academic expression...in anthropology's trade in curiosities, bringing 'home' accounts of exotic and unsettling practices from unfamiliar places. [Murdock, 1997:180]

This, alongside, cultural studies' historical development through the CCCS, with its political investment in social change "requires a model that allows the marginal, the deviant and the abnormal to be always granted significance" (Fiske, 1994:196). This focus on the marginal, alongside detailed description and qualitative information to an extent creates as well as feed the voyeurism of the subject. Without this articulation clear in my head, I have from the outset found conducting this research problematic. What does it mean to observe a cultural phenomenon like this, to research it, to write about it? Bringing back to the university, information I had found in the outside world about certain practices amongst Asian youth created a dilemma about 'power'. The power relations between the researcher and the researched are always a concern, but the power relations between those being 'studied' and those that will then be the recipients of this research, will access and make use of the study, has been a greater concern of mine. A sense of unease, alongside a fear that the work I was conducting, like other similar work in cultural studies, is not that far removed from old-school anthropology, has accompanied me throughout the research process. This feeling was more neatly articulated in parts of 'Dis-Orienting Rhythms: The politics of New Asian Dance Music', where it was an overarching concern of the whole project.

Cultural capital allows the consumer to purchase an 'interpretive' knowledge of 'alterity', mediate dislocation and make the supposedly

marginal palatable. **[Banerjea, K & Barn, 1996:205]**

The problem here is how to avoid this process, or if it is inherent in this kind of work, then, the problem rests on how it can be justified. The writers in 'Dis-Orienting Rhythms' use deconstructionism and insider quipping to try and resolve this. The work is reflexive and sensitive which can only be a good thing, but a side effect of this is that the book does not give us as much information about its topic, as I had hoped it would.

One of the ways in which the issue of power relations is said to be resolved is through actively making the research accessible to the participants or the communities to which the participants belong (assuming that they are interested, bearing in mind that the researcher's concerns are not necessarily the same as that of the research participants). Another way is to make the research available to a generally wider audience through different kinds of writing as well as the 'academic' Back, 1998; hooks, 1991:1-13). However, I feel that none of these fully take away from the fact that the process being played out is the one described below:

Translation becomes the performative function of terror, as 'otherness' is analytically captured and 'preserved' in the third space of the museum. **[Banerjea, K & Barn, 1996:205]**

Without wishing to dismiss this issue, to an extent, I feel it has arisen from the focus on reflexivity, to the point at which researchers spend considerable space, writing themselves into the picture, foregrounding their position. This is not only a valuable, but also a vital exercise. However during much of this reflection on the researcher's role it needs to be remembered that, at some

level, 'translation' is an inescapable part of the social researcher's role.

As Hastrup has said in summation of ethnographic practice,

"It collects people's accounts with the intention of making a different kind of sense" **[Hastrup, 1992 in McGuigan]**

I agree that part of the role of a researcher, is to ask questions that people would not necessarily ask of themselves, or to locate practices within broader concepts, to make a different kind of sense, that hopefully, enlightens.

It is important particularly when researching race, to avoid 'fixing' the participating 'subject' and feeding existing forms of essentialism. However, this should not result in a reluctance to analyse or identify patterns. As Silverman has stated "The facts *never* speak for themselves". (1998, p.100-101) Therefore, we must continue to attempt to build something from the research discoveries, and to place them within a broader perspective.

Perhaps the key then is to avoid the pretence that reflexivity erases the privilege of the researcher; and recognise that any lessons learnt from the research process are enabled by the structure of privilege.

However, this acknowledgement of my role as processor, still does not dismiss the issue of power relations, but I hope that writing about these power dynamics is to an extent to hold a mirror up to the reader's scopophilic gaze, and through this, raises for them the issue of their own position in relation to this research, and the nature of their interest in it^v.

2.3.3 The Academic Cycle

I found that when I began the work, there were a good many, fairly current cultural studies texts to support the subject of this study. Some of these fitted

in with much of what Stuart Hall had outlined in 'new ethnicities' work and many texts at the time were actively engaged with it (Gillespie, 1995; Back, 1996). There were also texts examining blackness through works such as Kobina Mercer's 'Welcome to the Jungle' (1994).

However, within cultural studies there is always a newer crop of books to engage with and soon indeed new ethnicities was no longer in fashion, superceded by a set of work that examined race within localities (Keith and Pile, 1993 and other spatial geography work such as Massey, 1994 And Soja, 1996).

Similarly, the topics of hip-hop and rap were no longer being written about, as they had been when I first began looking into this. This is one of the problems within a discipline that engages so frequently with current issues, especially within the popular cultural studies field. This trend cycle often means that cultural phenomena are not often explored to their fullest, and issues are left half explored. In my privileged status as a research student, I have the opportunity to examine issues without the pressure of accessing funding to obtain publications in time for the RAE, and therefore can choose to look at a topic that is no longer in circulation as much. I chose to continue to examine this phenomenon, as I felt that it would make a significant contribution to the development of contemporary Asian youth culture, and the way that it has emerged in a highly visible manner into the public sphere. Although the critical moment in this appropriation has passed, I feel it is crucial not to abandon it as it is invaluable to an understanding of the future development of South Asian British youth cultures.

2.4 Conclusion

A consideration of the research issues detailed above gave me an understanding of the ways in which to approach the research as well as a recognition that the research process is a negotiation and continually reformulated throughout the process.

ⁱ I have learnt from interview experience that people are often reassured by research that has a degree of structure as opposed to that which is totally free.

ⁱⁱ Measures such as Income and employment and educational attainment. Some of the interviewees had started out in employment but many were students, and had not yet finished their education. The fact that they were students could be said to imply a middle-class status, however this is not always true, particularly as one interviewee said that she was not from a well-off background although her family placed a high value on education.

ⁱⁱⁱ More importantly they were ordered so that they progressed from the specific to the general, requesting detail whilst also asking participants to consider issues centred around the effect of their consumption/appropriation of African-American culture on their emerging adult identity.

^{iv} South Asian is a constructed category, used to define those from the sub-continent, I have used this open term to describe the appropriation by young people of all South Asian backgrounds; however, there are vast differences within that category, and where pertinent, the national and regional background of British Asians is referred to.

^v Feminist artists such as Jo Spence and Cindy Sherman have developed this idea much more in attempting to destabilise the gaze of the viewer. Another way in which audiences and viewers have been made to reflect on their own position to the text is in the theoretical writings and practices espoused by Bertolt Brecht who uses a variety of techniques such as addressing the viewer directly and historicizing the subject matter as processes to disengage the viewer and generate self awareness. (Thomson and Sacks, 1994).

3

The Commodification of African-American culture

Naturally, there was a uniform. They each dripped gold and wore bandanas, either wrapped around their foreheads or tied at the joint of an arm or leg. The trousers were enormous, swamping things, the left leg always inexplicably rolled up to the knee; the trainers were equally spectacular, with tongues so tall they obscured the entire ankle; baseball caps were compulsory, low slung and irremovable, and everything, everything, everything was *Nike*TM; wherever the five of them went the impression they left behind was of one gigantic swoosh, one huge mark of corporate approval.

'White Teeth'
Zadie Smith (2000)

3.1 Introduction

In order to discuss the appropriation of Black American culture by South Asian youth in Britain, the forms of Black-American codes, and their mediation through television, film and particularly music, must first be examined.

This chapter will address the commercial forms of African-American culture that are available for consumption and contextualise these within a history of black entertainment. I will also examine theories that give insight into the reasons behind this consumption of black codes by audiences globally. In particular I wish to draw on some of the early work surrounding youth subcultures; I feel that much of this work remains prescient to any examination of youth. These works contain detailed examinations of local-level activity, understood through larger structural frameworks, and followed the Chicago school in seeking to establish how subgroups understood their own activities; all of which gave an insight into the production of meanings.

3.2 The Money and the Power: Representations and the Market Place

3.2.1 Americanisation

“Entertainment... is fast becoming the driving wheel of the new world economy”, wrote Michael Wolf recently (Wolf, 1999:4) and as a key player in the entertainment business himself, he should know. The industry is one of the most lucrative of all of American exports. Within Britain, and indeed globally,

access to American cultural products has increased. It is a large strand within an overall process of globalisation or 'Americanisation' as some see it (Hall, 1991; Sivanandan, 1982), and Britain, as an English speaking country with a strong historical link to America, is seen as perhaps the most important market for American entertainment produce.

The American entertainment industry dominates the global market to such an extent that fears have been expressed from all quarters (from right-wing nationalists to liberal sentimentalists), of an all-encompassing American culture that is rapidly supplanting the cultures of other nations and localities. The debates about globalisation are well documented (Hall, 1991; Sivanandan, 1982; Kiely and Marfuet, 1998; Barker, 1999). Within these debates it is implicitly acknowledged that through global brands such as coca-cola, Disney and Hollywood the US is seen to epitomise popular culture itself.

"American popular culture is the closest approximation there is today to a global lingua franca." [Todd Gitlin, 1992, in Cashmore, 1994:196]

American cultural produce arrives into Britain through the mediums of film, music and television, through commercials advertising products, through sports and through the signs and ethos of its commercial entertainment enterprises.

Through the mediums of music, film and television, particular products and lifestyles are promoted. Through these visual medium, other commercial products are propagated as part of a whole visual package that consumers can attain.

"Television has become the central apparatus of consumer society. It

promotes not just products, but a culture in which products have value”
[Cashmore, 1994:6]

3.2.2 African-American Entertainment

The role played by African-Americans in the history of entertainment in America is vital. Here, I go on to examine some of the more recent key moments in African-American entertainment as they have been part of the new phase of global commercialisation outlined above, and some would argue at the forefront of this process.

A key moment in that was ‘The Cosby Show’ (1984), which became hugely popular all over the worldⁱⁱ. The popularity of the Cosby show led to ‘friendlier’ policies towards the depiction of black images on American media. Shows such as ‘A different World’ (1987) and ‘The fresh Prince of Bel-air’ (1990) became popular on Network television in Britain. In particular, ‘The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air’ was a more deliberated attempt by networks to capitalise on the commercial success of black youth culture as observed in the popularity of rap music, hip-hop culture and a resurgence in Black cinema where John Singleton and Spike Lee took urban life as their creative impetus. Since the advent of satellite in Britain, access to American entertainment products has proliferated still further as the commercial representations that were proving especially popular were emerging through the new Video industry in the form of MTV and shows such as ‘Yo MTV Raps’, which was a mass-market forum for the growing commercial appeal of rap.

From its beginnings in the Bronx of the mid 70's, Hip-hop by 1999 came to account for the biggest single sector of the American pop market (Ogg and Upshall, 1999). The marketability of rap music expanded the hip-hop industry into film with rap music forming the soundtrack to numerous filmsⁱⁱⁱ. This boom in production of films about African-American subjects was undoubtedly informed by the fact that 'While African-Americans constitute only about 12% of the population, they make up about 25% of the movie-going audience' [Lusane, 1993]. However, its global sale for mass consumption means that there is a recognition of its popularity far beyond the African-American market.

3.2.3 'Blackness' as a Sign of the 'Real'.

The success of these films in terms of revenue demonstrated the capacity of hip-hop to expand markets through the commodification of 'legitimate grief and unrest'. (Lusane, 1993:47). The claims to 'ghetto' authenticity of rap narratives and the claims to a deeper 'reality' that are made on behalf of rap stars by cultural commentators, suggests an 'intensely real' experience or what Herman Gray has referred to as a 'hyper-culture'. (Gray, 1995).

Andrew Ross is one of the commentators who has noted the way in which 'blackness' has come to signify 'authenticity' in the popular domain. The access to the 'authentic' can allow allows consumers to claim a deeper knowledge of the 'other'; however, it also allows some consumers to make connections with their own lives. The narratives and visual iconography that sell hip-hop have further embedded this link between the 'real' and 'blackness'.

"The black male body signifies a 'realness' - an authenticity - in which the ambivalence of meaning is halted. The crisis and trauma of urban violence is played out on the black body." **[Sharma and Sharma 2000:109]**

The closing off of other possible meanings has the effect of embedding certain representations. Some of the reasons why meanings become attached to certain representations are examined below, with reference to 'blackness'.

3.2.4 Representations

It has been said that stereotypes are 'selective descriptions - they select features which have particular ideological significance'; (Sullivan, T. & Jenkes, Y., 1997:83) which could explain the focus on the sexual prowess of the black male. Black men too continue to be portrayed as sexually predatory, with an emphasis on the penis as evinced in recent media examples including the furore around Mike Tyson and the circus surrounding the O.J. Trial. Paul Hoch (1970) has argued that at different historical times, men from different backgrounds have been positioned in the role of the bestial male. He demonstrates how, at significant times, men have been cast in this role. For example, in Nazi Germany it was Jewish men; after the mutiny, it was Indian men; and at times, the white working-class male has been cast in this role. He reasons that the powerful group in a society presents its desire for power and sex and projects it onto the less powerful. Despite the lack of agency this argument allows the marginalized groups (see for example, the sophisticated ways in which these myths are emulated, problematised, inversed and generally toyed with by Black rappers), it

nonetheless demonstrates how the myth of the black rapist gains its powerful hold on western society today.

As bell hooks points out in 'Race and Representation', these myths can serve entertainers and advertisers who can employ them to their own ends:

Since black female sexuality has been represented in racist/sexist iconography as more free and liberated, many black women singers... have cultivated an image which suggests they are sexually available and licentious" **[Hooks, 1992]**

3.2.5 Summation

The intention here has been to give an overview of the way in which African-American culture has been commodified for global consumption and within that, to present an overview of the representational meanings that have been attached to the signifier of 'blackness'.

An overt focus on representations over and above the examination of more troublesome structural factors can be a problematic activity. However, there is clearly a link between the power structures existing in a society and representations of the less powerful and marginalized in society. Therefore, the representations that proliferate about these groups do need to be taken into consideration, particularly in this context of a study highlighting how these representations are consumed, and appropriated at a local level. As Hartmann and Husband concluded in their seminal study of the mass media, the media-

"have not merely reflected public consciousness on matters of race and colour, but have played a significant part in shaping this consciousness" **[Hartmann and Husband, 1974:146]**

3.3 Style, Commodity and Other Themes from Hip-Hop

In the previous section I examined the commercial viability and commodification of African American culture in the global marketplace. At the forefront of this phenomenon has been rap and hip-hop.

At this juncture, I would like to examine some of the key themes identified within rap and hip-hop culture. A detailed examination of these themes draws out the codes available for consumption; the links between these themes and the lives of young Asians in Britain are explored in chapter five.

3.3.1 Space

One of the ways in which hip-hop culture began is through neighbourhood parties held in parks and on the streets, through which public spaces were re-appropriated. As Baker explains,

‘The park was a favoured locale for hooking up a sound system to a lamppost and draining off public power’ **[Baker, 1993:47]**

This noise became mobile as huge speakers in 4X 4 vehicles, or open top cars became fashionable. (Baker, 1993). Despite the increasing number of laws against it, graffiti also proliferated in a way that made a mark on public spaces,

“Through dace, style and graffiti, urban space is symbolically reappropriated” **[Sharma and Sharma 2000:111]**

The notion of setting in specific localised spaces is further off-set by the narratives within rap lyrics often set within a named locality^{iv}. Neighbourhoods, ghettos, specific places named in rap lyrics, territorial battles between gangs all

seek to make the notion of space (specifically urban space) the clear vocalisation of the local within this global mass marketed form. Even within record companies as Negus points out,

“uncritically received cultural assumptions and commonsense ideas about the location of rap are articulated continually around notions of the street”
[Negus, 1999:503]

The idea of the ghetto is one of the well-known components of rap and hip-hop music, as we know from recent examples in Britain a public gathering of ten or more young people (the Criminal Justice Act 58.1) can be a threat to authorities. In the same way, the claims on public spaces were seen to contribute to the moral panic around rap music. According to Baker:

“The argument about boomboxes was not only a John Stuart Millian quibble about the nature of liberty with respect to silence and noise, it was equally a panicked response by some citizens to what they perceived as the ethnic pollution of public space by the sonic ‘other’.
[Baker, 1993:43]

A further effect is that the public sphere has always been viewed as a masculinised space as opposed to the dwellings and interiors, characterised as belonging to the female. The territorial ethos of rap and hip-hop has further masculinised the genre. However, the ways in which it becomes consumed, can also provide a route to public confidence and for masculine assertion for females, as discussed in chapter 5.

3.3.2 Gender

Recent furores over gangsta rap has raised the issue of misogyny in rap. This controversy has remained resolutely unresolved, although it might be said to

have subsided for the time being. Much of the content of rap lyrics has been rightfully viewed as misogynistic and degrading to women. Much of the imagery employed by rappers, particularly in the sub-genre of gangsta rap, cashes in on the notion of the oversexed black woman to be objectified and used for sexual gratification or as a recipient of violence^v. The use of models and dancers engaging in provocative dancing in videos accompanying these tracks is consistent with their commodification alongside jeeps and jewellery in many lyrics and visuals. These representations of women in rap coincided with, and were thus reinforced by, the scape-goating of single mothers as 'welfare moms' by the Bush administration blamed for the moral degeneration of African-American communities.

Part of this denigration of women, is to buoy up a macho posturing that is a prerequisite in many of rap's more boastful narratives. As the critic Jon Michael Spence stated:

"Male rappers, flaunting exaggerated perceptions of their sexual capacities, tease white fears of alleged black illicit sexualities..."
[Spencer, 1992]

Although these gender politics appear to contrast with the otherwise progressive views of many rappers, it is consistent with much of afro-centricist thinking and similarly in other nationalist movements which propagate traditional gender roles (Gilroy, 1993, White, 1990, Ransby and Matthew, 1993), albeit with contestation from women within these movements.

3.3.3. Black Nationalism

Black nationalism is a theme running throughout African-American history (Gilroy, 1993), and rap artists have embraced it as a mode of anti-authoritarianism. Lusane (1993) has argued that it is 'the dominant ideological trend' for rappers.

A part of the revival of Malcolm X's legacy, has been the perceived need by community leader for a 'redemptive black patriarch' (Ransby and Matthew, 1993); Malcolm X with his black nationalist roots, and advocacy of traditional gender roles through his membership of the Nation of Islam have made him a fitting figure. The commercial success of the film, and the revival of Malcolm X through rap music that prefaced it led to what David Maurasse has termed 'Malcolmania' (Ransby and Matthew, 1993). The commodification of his pictures on t-shirts, posters and most memorably, on caps as well as quotes and his biography have been highlighted.

3.3.4 'The Alcohol, Tennis Shoe, Clothing, Hat and Film Industries'^{vi}

Forms of rap and hip-hop culture have clearly become highly commercialised and therefore, modified to sell in quantities expected by large corporations.

Furthermore, it is seen as lucrative business for record companies. Lusane explains that:

"Rap is attractive because it requires low-level investment costs for the corporations."**[Lusane, 1993:44]**

The marketing budget supplied by the larger record companies has ensured that

these forms have had a global impact in terms of sales.

It's easy to guess why the commercialised forms of Black American culture and in particular hip-hop culture appeal to many teenagers, as Herman Gray describes.

"In the culture of rap and contemporary dance, young men and women pose in defiant (and, for many, menacing) stances of authority and affirmation. These are simultaneously expressions of individual autonomy, the influence of the peer group, and distance from the culture of adult authority and control." **[Gray, 1995:153]**

Sharma and Sharma have contributed to this debate adding-

"Black music has become a universal language for the soundtrack of urban dissent and possibility. It pervades popular culture and can be readily appropriated and utilized as a commodity" **[Sharma and Sharma, 2000:111]**

bell hooks argues that it is rap's resonance with the dominant ideology, rather than its otherness, to which its success can be attributed. Kitwana reaffirms this in his pocket-sized book 'The Rap on Gangsta Rap'

The trend for corporate commercialisation of various black cultural expressions has been towards manipulation in the form of stereotypical characterizations of Blacks suggesting the popularization has transformed the black cultural expression from black culture into 'universal' **[Kitwana, 1994:13]**

This has led to a demonisation of black youth, according to hooks, who are after all only marketing themselves with 'fictive accounts of underclass black life to be more lauded, more marketable, because mainstream conservative white audiences desire these images' (Hooks, 1994:152). Therefore, hooks and others

have claimed that hip-hop marketing is aimed at white middle class youth.

“While media and corporate industry push the idea (race-baiting) that white listeners are fascinated with these images of blackness, (black youth as icons of rebellion and coolness, Black sexuality and street life as exotic) much of the gaze seems to be coming from corporate industry itself.”^{vii}
[Kitwana, p.18, 1994 ‘The rap on Gangsta Rap’]

Kitwana has pointed out that the figures do not necessarily reflect actual sales^{viii}.

This would imply that the argument advanced by hooks et al that it is a suburban white audience, is perhaps misleading. It further ignores the way in which commercialised forms of hip-hop have been taken up by non-middle-class non-white youth, often in differing and distinctive ways. It is arguable that there is a difference between this take-up, and the generic playful consumption of commercialised Black American culture by the ‘middle class white youth’ identified by theorists such as hooks, Cashmore and others.

In France, for example, the migratory experiences of young Arab and African immigrants have begun to be captured through the artistic forms of hip-hop in the records of MC Solaar and Nique Ta Mere, amongst others.

Another example is the critically acclaimed and successful film *La Haine* is a film that depicts the lives of immigrant youth living in the banlieus of France through a ‘hip-hop sensibility’ (Sharma and Sharma, 2000).

Further examples are provided by by Ahyan Kaya (1997), and Steve Bennett in research examining the appropriation of rap and hip-hop by young men of Turkish origin living in Germany. Kaya links the appropriation of rap by the urban disenfranchised to Gramsci’s theories of organic intellectuals. He sees them as

'the storytellers of the diasporic youths of the urban landscape' (Kaya, 1997:2).

This, however, is not without its problems.

"Raps's pedagogy, like the initial stages of all pedagogies of oppressed people, emerges incomplete, contradictory and struggling for coherence"
[Lusane, 1993:54]

3.3.5 Style and Success

In the 50's a prominent study carried out for a chain of radio stations studied the black American market through survey. It stressed that black consumers were conscious of and maintained loyalty to brands (Dates and Barlow, 1990). Subsequent studies also described African-American consumers as "frequently purchasing leading brands in their search for status and prestige". (Dates and Barlow, 1990) By 1992, African-Americans had come to represent a \$200 million market making them "a socio-economic entity, wealthier and more populated than most independent nations in the world" (McDonald, 1992:268).

Whether it is reports like these that influence corporations to employ the sign of 'blackness' to sell products or the fact that 'blackness' and youth has become synonymous with cool, the use of black entertainers and sports stars have been key in the branding of youth products and the marketing of a youth lifestyle.

Naomi Klein has monitored this in 'No Logo' explaining that key brands were

"catapulted to brand superstardom in no small part by poor kids who incorporated Nike and Hilfiger into hip-hop style at the very moment when rap was being thrust into the expanding youth culture limelight by MTV and *Vibe*". **[Klein, 2000:73]**

In fact, Nike is so keen to use urban black youth in their marketing strategies that they employ marketers and designers to 'test' the latest products on youth

in inner-city neighbourhoods and borrow their 'style attitude and imagery'; they even have a term for this practice, 'bro-ing'. (Klein, 2000:75)

This is a two-way partnership as rap artists seem to embrace the commodities and latest brands and promote their cultural currency. This is not too far removed from the masculine posturing of other music-based youth subcultures of the past, and to demonstrate I refer to a quote from Hebdidge's well-known 'Reggae, Rastas and Rudies':

"The influence of the gangster film shows itself in the flash and swagger of the urban rudeboy, and in the ostentatious displays of solvency (the diamond rings, the limousines, the fedoralis) which were used to signify success." **[Hebdidge 197-:p.27]**

In the same article, Hebdidge puts forward a theory of style as:

"A means whereby commodities can be redefined and used to signal a measure of freedom (albeit circumscribed) from the values of dominant groups which control the production of those commodities". **[Hebdidge, 197-:1]**

This suggests that 'the flash and swagger' of material goods and brands by rap artists is not as straightforward a consumption. In fact, it suggests there is something in the subversion of these commodities by rap artists that appeals to their audiences. Perhaps, it is this consumption and the 'display' though material goods of a lucrative criminal lifestyle as suggested by the lyrics of rap tracks^{ix}. However, the consumption and endorsements of products and brands by leading black figures in the entertainment and sports industry, almost to the extent that they come with 'promotional tie-ins or become a franchise in themselves,' (Klein, 2000:77) ensures that a lifestyle is promoted through consumer goods. This

process of creating a lifestyle through consumption has been noted before; the stereotyping of subcultures and minority cultures is the process whereby they are 'incorporated' according to John Clarke, in an early piece of work.

"One major effect of such stereotyping is to focus attention on particular stylistic and behavioural elements, and less on overall content of the subculture. We might characterize this representation as the presentation of a "lifestyle" as a "consumption style". [His underlining] **[Clarke, 1973, p.11]**

Through this thesis I hope to examine the way in which this lifestyle becomes an attractive consumption style for certain groups of consumers and why they choose to invest in it. Clarke stated that this-

"Mass media stereotyping of specific groups, although intended to condemn and exclude such groups, may well have the opposite effect. (11) It makes certain elements of the style available to a wider audience, among who may be groups who find it homologous [his underline] with their concerns, and appropriate it for their own use". **[P.11, 1973 John Clarke 'The Skinheads and the Study of Youth Culture']**

This thesis seeks to examine this appropriation and the meanings given to it as well as establish *why* young South Asians 'find it homologous to their concerns'.

3.4 Conclusion

Aspects of African-American culture have been diluted and channelled for mass consumption, and it has rapidly becoming pervasive amongst youth the world over. Hip-hop has been at the vanguard of this commercialisation; through a number of media, such as film, Television, music and fashion. Some of the themes that resonate through hip-hop, and have particular relevance for Asian youth were also examined. The ways in which aspects of these themes impact

upon the participants of my research are examined in chapter 5; after I have situated the context within which this appropriation took place for Asian youth.

ⁱ This process of cultural domination has been facilitated by the economic consideration in other countries that it is cheaper to buy exported products rather than producing home-grown programmes in their entirety.

ⁱⁱ The Cosby show arrived at a time when Reaganist policies were promoting the new right ideas of individual enterprise whilst diminishing the idea of structural disadvantage. It also came about through Cosby's involvement in production and insistence on creative control. For further detail see, Jhally, 1992

ⁱⁱⁱ Amongst these were such as 'New Jack city' (1991); 'House Party' (1990); 'Boyz in the Hood' (1991); 'Do the Right Thing' (1989); 'Trespass' (1992); Menace to Society (1993) as well as a filter though into more mainstream Hollywood comedies such as 'Sister Act' (1992); and 'Dangerous Minds' (1995) and the more recent teen movie 'Save the Last dance' (2000).

^{iv} E.g. 'Straight Outta Compton' (1988), the frequently mentions of Long Beach in L.A. by Dr. Dre and Snoop Doggy Dogg, Mobb Deep's preoccupation with Queen's in New York and the Wu-Tang Clan's Staten Island.

^v For example, Ice Cube's Ghetto Bird (1993); Snoop Doggy Dogg's album, 'Doggy Style' (1993); Eminem, 'Bonnie and Clyde' (1997).

^{vi} Lusane, 1993.

^{vii} This point is supported by a recent article on a conference hosted by Black record-company owner and supported by numerous rap artists encouraging 'artists to abandon songs about drugs and gangsters' (Metro, 2001), however, the Virgin corporation spokesman was against the notion, falling back on the argument that these lyrics depicted the 'real' lives of ghetto youth. "Some of these kids have been brought up surrounded by violence. They are speaking openly about what they see in their environment" he is quoted as saying. This throws into doubt whether the audience of rap is mostly white or if it is a projection of the white managed record companies.

^{viii} General billboard sales measure are based on surveys of 24,000 *active* consumers as well as an assumption that as 'there are more whites in the US than blacks... white teenagers are rap's greatest buying audience. (Kitwana, 1994)]. Tricia Rose, (1994) has pointed out that although sales appear to be within a majority white audience, there may be a much higher use and exchange, borrowing and copying of these albums among black youth, therefore, sales are an inadequate way to measure actual consumption.

^{ix} For example, M.O.P and Busta Rhymes 'Ante Up' (2001); Coolio, 'It Takes a Thief' (1994).

4

Asian Youth in Britain: invisibility and Hyper-visibility

He knew that he, Millat, was a Paki no matter where he came from; that he smelt of curry; had no sexual identity; took other peoples jobs; or had no job and bummed off the state; or gave all the jobs to his relatives; that he could be a dentist or a shop-owner or a curry-shifter, but not a footballer or film-maker; that he should go back to his own country; or stay here and earn his bloody keep; that he worshipped elephants and wore turbans; that no one who looked like Millat, or spoke like Millat, or felt like Millat, was ever on the news unless they had recently been murdered. In short, he knew he had no face in this country, no voice in this country, until the week before last when suddenly people like Millat were on every channel and every radio and every newspaper and they were angry, and Millat recognised the anger, thought it recognised him, and grabbed it with both hands.

'White Teeth'
Zadie Smith (2000)

4.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter, I examined the commodification of African-American culture for mass and global consumption within the context of representations of black ethnic minorities in the media, examining the factors that make it attractive to disenfranchised youth and which led to a cultural moment in which young South Asians were appropriating black American codes within Britain.

Within this chapter, I examine the factors in the lives and circumstances of Asians themselves, that led to this cultural moment through the development of Asian youth cultures in Britain, with a specific focus on the visible presence of Asian communities in the media, and in the public sphere. The first section examines the lack of representations of Asians in the mainstream media, as well as the theoretical deficiencies of early representations and the newer representations arising out of key moments such as the Rushdie affair. An increase in mainstream representations in recent times is duly noted, followed by an examination of the development of a black public sphere, and its contribution to the use of black American codes by South Asian youth in Britain. The second section examines the over-visibility of Asians in urban locations, making a link to the proliferation of newer more masculinized Asian representations, in particular the panic around 'the Asian Gang' (Alexander, 2000). Finally, I look at the visibility of Asian youth in academic and policy narratives.

I argue that Asian communities have lacked a cultural space in the public spheres in British society, and especially, in ways that are relevant to youth.



However, recent changes in perception and actual development of Asian youth culture in a public domain in Britain have been key factors in the development of the Asian 'wigger'.

4.2 Media (in)Visibility

There has been and continues to be a palpable lack of South Asian representations on the British mainstream media, a factor in the development of a separate public sphere. Below some of the early media representations of Asians are examined followed by newer more masculinised representations.

4.2.1 Early Media Representations

The common and lasting representations of the Asian community in Britain date back to the large migrations of the 50's and the 70's, but have their roots in colonialism. Within such representations, Asian communities have been depicted as traditional, or backward, hardworking and passive. Specifically, the representations of youth have generally portrayed them as having a conflict between east and west, repressed, suppressed and generally downtrodden (See Sharma, Hutnyk & Sharma 1996, and Alexander, 2000 for further detail). Young people have tended to be perceived as hard working especially within education; the potential this hard work engenders is considered, in the stereotype, to be curtailed by early, arranged and possibly forced, marriage. Indeed, one could go so far as to say that both the issue of marriage and the question of educational attainment are characterized by a motif of constraint or repression (Taylor, 1976; Ballard and Ballard, 1977). The stereotypical representations of Asians as passive, weak, and effeminate,

as well as a focus on the food, clothes and domestic lives of Asians landed them with a very feminized set of stereotypes. These stereotypes, produced by dominant white society, worked in conjunction with those held about the Afro-Caribbean communities who were portrayed as criminal, deviant, sexually dominant and/or predatory and very masculinized. As Taylor said in his research on young Asians in the seventies,

“This politicised unassertiveness contrasts with the increasingly militant attitudes reported among young West Indians in England” **[Taylor, 1976: 217]**

Banerjea and Banerjea attribute this to ‘a hierarchically determined cultural binarism’ (Banerjea and Banerjea, 1996:109) that is seen to prevail in Britain. For this state of play to be maintained, protest and resistance by South Asian communities through struggles such as the formation of the Indian workers association, organised partly to combat poor working conditions and racism, the formation of the Southall Youth Movement and Southall Black Sisters as well as anti-racist organisations such as the Newham Monitoring Project, (not to mention countless other organisations around Britain as well as less well-known incidents of individual and collective acts of resistance) were subsumed when they did not fit in with the overall framework through which Asian communities were seenⁱⁱ.

Many of these stereotypes of Asians have become heightened with regards to Islamic communities. A key event in the embedding of a fear of Islam was the Salman Rushdie affairⁱⁱⁱ, which bought out fears of the rogue nation and the need for the Western world to protect itself against the new ‘other’. Osama Bin-Laden was constructed as the super villain in an occidental news

narrative. The Gulf war merely worsened the image of Muslims as despotic (Sayyid, 1997; Asad and Owen, 1983; Modood, 1992). This was followed by a spate of other news stories such as that of Muslim men from Birmingham allegedly involved in terrorist acts in the Yemen and the involvement of mosques in conflicts abroad, (See as examples, Foster et al, 2000, Whittaker et al, 1999). Such formations are the localised manifestations of global scares about a militant Islam. Islamophobia contains within it the concentrated versions of all the fears about Asians in general; that they belong to an alien culture, which is the very antithesis to a liberal modern nation. The scares about a growing militancy in Islam were the fulcrum around which representations of Asian youth began to turn as they highlighted the disjuncture between the 'passive' Asian and the more recent images.

4.2.2 A Change in Media Representations

Such earlier scare stories put Asians onto the media stage, which expanded Asian visibility in the mainstream public sphere, leading to a diversification in images of South Asians in the British media, as well as an opportunity for self-representations to be produced. A key example is a comedy sketch show made by and starring South Asians, 'Goodness Gracious Me' which uses as its material aspects of Asian and white lives and their interactions, whilst having a mainstream success. The emergence of the Asian underground scene in London in the early 1990's and a 'new Asian Kool' (See Huq, 1996), has finally seen South Asians enter the 'alternative' and 'cool' section of the public sphere; previously Asian and cool were mutually exclusive terms. This has

been facilitated by the exoticist consumption of facets of Asian culture by stars such as Demi Moore, Courtney Love and Madonna, ensuring that signs of Asian-ness have continued to circulate^{iv}. Other media presences included a proliferation of Asian newspapers and magazines, such as Snoop and Asian Bride making it onto *some* WH Smith shelves. South Asian involvement in new media, such as the world wide web, has done much to ensure an increasing presence. The presence of a few celebrities such as Narinder from the popular television series Big Brother has placed Asians onto the mainstream media map and in the public eye. Despite an increase in representations, the ways in which South Asians are portrayed leaves a lot to be desired. For example, in a liberal and self-conscious move away from older stereotypes of Asians that depicted their 'alien' practices and as always, forced marriages, there is a trend of erasure of difference, of presenting Asians as 'just the same'.

In the Broadcasting Standards Commission Report on media representations of ethnic minorities, an interviewee said of the former Eastenders couple Gita and Sanjay Kapoor:

"Gita and Sanjay are Asians, but they don't show any religious ceremonies or relatives and stuff like that. What's the point in having ethnic minorities and not portraying them in an honest way?" **[In Gibson, 1999]**

Partially as a result of this lack of 'honest' representations about themselves, and partly perhaps to have a set of shared references with others in the community, South Asian people have increasingly turned towards their own

media through South Asian English and language papers, bollywood films and tapes and Satellite Television.

TV Asia emerged as a subscription satellite channel in 1992, to cater for audiences of Indian Pakistani and Bangladeshi origin communities residing in Europe. Zee TV emerged in India in 1992 as a satellite broadcast channel set up to rival Doordarshan, the state-owned channel (Dudrah, 2001) and took over TV Asia in 1995. From the beginning, Zee TV Europe was available in satellite channel packages produced by the British sky Broadcasting Network (BskyB), by and far the leading satellite service providers in the UK^v. As it has been argued that Asian communities were poorly represented in British media, TV Asia and Zee TV were taken up by Asian communities by a large number of households in the UK^{vi}. This meant that households would have access to much more American programming than the households without satellite channels, this include channels such as Sky One, Sky Movies and MTV^{vii}. Therefore, arguably, Asian youth would have had potential access to a wider range of American programmes and music earlier, and in particular, representations of commodified African-American culture which was increasingly filling satellite airtime (For example, 'Yo MTV Raps', 'A Different World' and 'The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air' and screenings of Hollywood movies which displayed facets of black popular culture or took it as it's subject matter). Such access was, arguably, a factor in the appropriation of Black American products, codes and styles by South Asian British Youth.

4.3 Public (in)visibility

According to the 1991 census, the minority ethnic population lived overwhelmingly in urban areas (Moon and Aitkinson, 1997), and an increasing focus of the new urban geography work has examined the ways in which race is a factor that characterizes the city (see Keith, 1993). Race has played a vital role on the development of policy in urban areas (Moon and Aitkinson, 1997 for example). The myth of the melting pot contrasts with the realities of cities, which are 'racially fragmented and polarized structures', (Moon and Aitkinson, 1997). There has been a growing interest in urban geography and writings about the city in particular. The city has become a metaphor for changes induced by globalisation and postmodernisation.

The city of Birmingham, where a majority of this research was conducted, has the largest ethnic minority population outside of London, (the majority of which are from the South Asian population) and a long and nationally significant race history, highlighting the importance of race in an imaginary of the modern city.

4.3.1 The Urban Presence

There is a link between visibility in the city and race, and the ways in which urban spaces are racialised. The urban myths created around these spaces have been monitored most recently by Keith, Back et al in a set of working papers entitled 'Finding the Way Home' which examined the ways in which young people constructed their localities, and within a broader sense, argued

that a set of myths around urban localities become institutionalised and affects urban policy.

Governance in urban areas is significantly affected by these myths. In the popular imagining, the city has always been read as a space of fear and darkness, and these fears have long been bound with race. It could be argued that the project of colonialism, with its splitting of whole continents with straight lines, has always had a fascination with containment that has continued into governance of 'the other', and carried through into policy with the arrival of 'the other' to Britain.

All of this has several implications for the Asian community. Firstly the Asian community have been stereotyped as choosing to segregate themselves within British society, and this has been compounded by the invisibility of Asians in the British media. This ignores the ghettoisation process that has occurred due to the concentration of industries for which South Asians were invited to work. Discrimination (Rex and Moore, 1969, Ginsburg, 1992) and flaws in Local authority housing policies (Solomos and Singh, 1990) led to segregated patterns of residence for black and minority groups^{viii}. In Birmingham, this meant a concentration of its South Asian population in a handful of wards^{ix}. Similar factors have meant that African and African Caribbean populations in Birmingham, occupy similar spaces to that of Asians in Birmingham, as they are concentrated mostly in the same wards^x. This is significant, as I go on to argue the shared circumstances of Afro-Caribbeans and Asians allows a greater exchange of cultural codes to take place.

4.3.2 Social Structures and Spatial Relations

“Social relations always have a spatial form and a spatial content”
[Massey, 1994]

Surveys have consistently demonstrated that the position in the labour market of Afro-Caribbean and Asian men is inferior to White men. (See PSI survey, 1982, Jones, 1993, Braham et al., 1992) The differences between different ethnic minority rates of unemployment are magnified for the age range of 16-24^{xi}. Therefore, as well as shared localities, Asian and Afro-Caribbean youth share similar social conditions.

This has led to a cohabit spaces of activities and entertainment, for example, dance events long since catered for black and Asian music, (from the early Soul and reggae nights attended by Black and Asian young people to the R 'n' B and bhangra nights of today). These shared spaces and social conditions as well as recognition of racism as a factor in their lives suggest that it is seen as less of a transgression for Asian youth to appropriate black codes than white youth (Jones, 1988).

4.3.3 'Black' as a Political Category

A further factor may be a coalition based on around the term 'black' which emerged in the late eighties in policy and academic work. This was not simply a substitute term for 'coloured', an all-encompassing lumping together of the non-white, but mobilised by black organisations and policy-makers as a way to work together to improve rights and fight racism.

The formation of an anti-racist politics around a black identity did not last; such a grouping was seen to blot out real and significant differences and diversities in the communities within this banner. As Modood et al have reported in the PSI survey, despite the presence of the creation of such a politics over the last twenty years, only 'a fifth of South Asians think of themselves as black'. (Modood et al, 1997:355) However, identifying yourself as 'black' is not the same as recognising the commonalities between black communities.

4.3.4 The Black Public Sphere

Habermas's theory of a public sphere^{xii} is useful in a discussion of the visibility of Asians in the media, and in public spaces, and the relations between the two. It has been argued by Gilroy that the existence of spatial relations of power merge with black popular cultures to define a black public sphere, (Gilroy, 1987, 2000) that contributes to a communal aspect of black life and a sharing of cultural meanings. Dudrah (2001) has employed this notion in an analysis of black public spheres in Birmingham, which exist away from 'the exotic and racist gaze'. He argues,

"Black popular cultures in particular are part of the lifelines that enable the sustenance and renewal of the black public sphere as a strategic intervention against cultural and social exclusion" **[Dudrah, 2001]**

However, such positive benefits of an alternative space, are actually perceived as a facet of the insular nature of Asian communities. As Alexander explains "The search for exclusive space by black young people is perceived as at once 'inauthentic' and as politically regressive" (Alexander, 2000:239) because it is seen as not assimilating or not participating in the project of multicultural

plurality. The existence of an alternative sphere is sometimes used as justification for the exclusion of images of Asians from the media, and their ghettoisation as a way to create pockets of hyper-visibility in marginalized and criminalized city spaces and invisibility in dominant city spaces.

4.4 Riots and Gangs: Media and public hyper-visibility

The dramatic shift in the dominant image of Asian masculinity, from passive to dominating and aggressive has been sudden. (Goodey, 1999 – in Alexander, 2000). Therefore, without much evidence, the older stereotype of an Asian community who are inward looking mixed with newer ones of an aggressive Asian element to create a fear of 'an outsider within' aggressive and white-hating Bangladeshi youth.

These have been located at the level of urban youth in specific localities. Michael Keith notes that there has been a-

"Constitutively racialised link between Bengali masculinity and the streets of the East end" **[Keith, 1995:366]**

The metaphors of the ghetto with its deprivation, 'no-go areas' and gang warfare, are all too familiar as they are similar to those used about African-American in urban deprived areas, and these have been easily transposed onto inner-city Asian youth in recent years. The newer stereotypes of a threatening Asian masculinity have taken force and shape quickly, because they were already familiar with reference to black youth^{xiii}.

These stereotypes of Bengali boys have arisen in tandem with fears of a militant Islam; therefore the notion of young Bengali men in East London

armed with knives comes to dominance after Islamophobic scares of recent times.

The recent images of Asian masculinities have been further sustained by media reporting on the riots, which, it has been claimed by some^{xiv}, were aggravated by BBC reports on 'no-go areas'.

Clare Alexander in her book 'The Asian Gang' has examined one of the key ways in which Asian-ness has been re-versioned in a masculine light through the evocation of the gang. As she argues in the book, such racialized representations sustain-

" A series of images which position these young men as deviants, marginalized within –or indeed, outside of – both the local community and wider society." **[Alexander, 2000:125]**.

As many analyses of 'moral panics' have demonstrated, such scares trigger a fear within communities, which manufacture consent for further policing (Hall, 1978; Cohen, 1980).

4.4.1 Media Constructions

The demonisation of young Asian males and the contemporaneous threat of a perceived military Islam follows the model outlined by Hoch which suggests that certain representations of men as violent or hyper-sexual come about at times of threat that allows them to be further policed or persecuted^{xv}. This raises important questions; is it merely a construction? A media myth? If so, how do the subjects resist these representations? If not, why are Asian youth complicit in their own demonisation? Hoch's argument as well as lacking the consideration of agency of demonised subjects, also needs to take into account the ways in which some of these myths are taken up and turned to

their advantage by those demonised, perhaps out a the recognition that such racist constructions and racism “inhabits spaces of ambivalence, admiration, envy and desire” (Brah, 1996:38) arise as much out of envy and desire as fear and threat.

In this instance, I think it would be resisting evidence to say that the phenomenon of Asian self-assertion as well as the existence of gangs was wholly a media construction. However, it has nonetheless been an interpretation foisted on to actual cultural changes by the media, informed by institutionalised fears about cities and criminality and race. Without belittling the political struggles of earlier community activists, there appears to have been a definite reaction to the view of the passive Asian amongst Asian youth themselves in recent times.

The representation of the formation of Asian gangs (however and for whatever reasons they were actually formed), has differed in a significant way to representations of African-Caribbean gangs and East Asian Gangs. Myths of Yardies and Triads are based on a gang formed for criminal purposes, or at least whose purpose is to commit criminal acts. The ways in which Asian gangs are represented in the media^{xvi} have shifted away from this and are described in similar ways to the gangs of African-America. This formation of a gang is what could be termed a ‘brotherhood’ gang, which may commit acts of criminality, but is characterized by a shared bond, forged frequently by territorial conflict. Famous examples of this are the East Coast west Coast battles between rap artists and producers and the formation of loose gangs in hip-hop such as the ‘Wu-Tang Clan’^{xvii}.

Although these connections to other representations are important, it is important to take into account that many of the conflicts and depravation are rooted in specific localities with its own local histories and local antagonisms which have little to do with gang warfare (Alexander, 2001; Keith, 1993).

4.5 Academic and policy visibility

The research and academic writing on Asian communities in Britain have focused on the 'cultures' of the Asian communities and look at the cultural practices of Asians in terms of their 'difference' from the 'host' community (Taylor, 1976, Anwar, 1978, Thomson, 1974) Therefore, much of the writing on Asian (and indeed other ethnic minority) youth highlighted the 'between two cultures' dilemma.

These works focusing on community and traditions of south Asians fall into the framework of anthropology. Many later works fall into the new ethnicities framework. These have taken the emphasis away from the fractured duality of those earlier discourses and instead constructed ethnic identities as hybrid. Sometimes, this has been examined in relation to the deployment of commodities to create new forms of identities, in ways that came across as uncritical celebrations of commodity use and exchange. This formulation risks separating the youth in question away from the structural and community links that they are also framed by, and eclipses some of the continuities and traditions still shape their identities. (Parker, 1995).

Processes of borrowing and translation have been examined in cultural studies, (Bhabha, 1990, Hall, 1990, and more research-based works such as

Back, and Gillespie, 1995, in Alexander, 2000). However, the notion of 'hybridity' has been critiqued for obscuring wider processes of power formations and for an unthinking celebration of the marginal. (Sharma, 1996) The celebration of the marginal also has its consequences, for Asian communities. Michael Keith puts it well when he says:

"There is clearly a sense here in which the liberal white left themselves in a desperate search for the transformative political subject, will cast young Bengali men as the teleological delivery boys" **[Keith, 1995:368]**

There is also a way in which the counter-defence of Asian youth in reference to the riots and to their 'resistance' practices, needs to be read with caution; the problem is that the Bengali young men will also suffer the consequences of the extra policing and the water cannons. (Keith, 1995) Therefore the wishful projecting of the liberal left will have its casualties.

There are parallels here to the way that rap music has also been celebrated for its revolutionary possibilities, even when it is misogynistic and violent because it is seen as marginal despite its recent incorporation, and therefore inherently subversive^{xviii}. An example is the case of Henry Louis Gate's defending 'As Nasty as They wanna Be' (1989) by 2 Live Crew and endless columns celebrating Eminem in broadsheets like the Guardian (see Wazir, 1999).

4.6 Conclusion

In her influential study of a South Asian community in Southall Marie Gillespie made the observation that young Asians seemed to have a particular affinity

with America, which they turn to as "a third space of fantasy...identification...since neither British nor Indian media offer representations which they view as acceptable or appropriate" (Gillespie 1995:197). Although this is rather a dualistic simplification, it nevertheless serves to demonstrate young Asian adolescents' attraction to America.

However, whilst Gillespie has observed the enthusiasm for the generic American produce such as McDonalds or coca-cola amongst Asian youth, what I am examining is the way that African-American cultural products have been appropriated. As one of my interviewees put it 'I know loads of Asians who think they're black'.

ⁱ The 'wigger' is a descriptive (and more often than not a derogatory term used to describe the appropriation of black codes by a white person (usually males) I use it here because it sums a phenomenon I describe but within inverted commas because I use it merely as a descriptive term and to distance myself from the negative connotations that the term can have. I also use it in this aloof way, because it is not intended to closely reflect the research participants involved in this research.

ⁱⁱ For detail on the formation of such organisations see, Brah, A. 1996 and Kalra, Hutnyk and Sharma 1996; for detail on how representations come into affect and for detail into how stereotypes work to emphasise some facets and conceal others, see Hartmann and Husband, 1974; Sullivan and Jenkes, 1997

ⁱⁱⁱ In which the publication of his novel, *The Satanic Verses* (1988) led to a Fatwah being issued and threats on his life. In Britain, there were public protests against the Publication.

^{iv} Demi Moore and other Hollywood stars publicise the works of Deepak Chopra; Courtney Love has been publicly seeking solace in the Sikh faith; Madonna swapped the gym for yoga, recorded a single in Sanskrit and famously wore Henna on her hand in the music video for the single *Frozen* (1998) starting a craze.

^v Until 1995, 50% of the Zee TV share was owned by News Corporation Ltd (Dudrah, 2001) which also own the BskyB network, and as part of the News Corporation's synergetic business strategy, this was likely to be a factor in the availability of Zee TV in leading satellite packages and deals available to consumers.

^{vi} Approximately 30% of British South Asian households subscribe to Zee TV.

^{vii} The American music station MTV, a music video channel started in 1989 as a venture by Viacom, and which built its success on black music, was a key part of this package.

^{viii} Although some South Asians have moved out into the suburbs, the proximity to places of worship, and access to South Asian goods and services, as well as cheap housing and poverty have been factors in the maintenance of concentration of South Asian populations.

^{ix} 8 of 39 wards Aston, Handsworth, Sandwell, Small Heath, Soho, Sparkbrook, Sparkhill and Washward Heath (1991 Census in Dudrah, 2001).

^x There are the wards of Aston, Handsworth, Ladywood, Sandwell, Soho, Sparkbrook, showing an overlap in five out of the six wards.

^{xi} The unemployment rates are highest for Pakistani and Bangladeshi men, followed by Afro-Caribbean men who have higher rates than amongst Indians and African-Asians. (Jones, 1993, Braham, 1992). Black and Asian men also tend to be in the lower echelons of employment (Jones, 1993) and it is well-known fact that 'workers in lower levels are more vulnerable than other workers to unemployment' (Jones, 1993:114, Braham et al, 1992). A Marxist/Weberian based Dual market theory suggests that employment ethnic minorities from a secondary market that is much lower paid and insecure than the primary markets.

^{xii} The notion of the public sphere was developed by Jurgen Habermas (Lechte, 1994), to examine the concept of public opinion and a public realm explaining the ways in which powerful bourgeois men lived their life in a public realm (dominated by communicative action) as well as a private sphere.

^{xiii} For theoretical insight into what allows such an easy transposition of demonised masculinity, see discussion on Paul Hoch in chapter 3.

^{xiv} Krishnan Guru Murthy, the Channel 4 News reporter recently made this claim in Eastern Eye and Ken Livingstone in the Independent intimated the same.

^{xv} This has been specifically written about with reference to Asian youth by Goodey, 1999, in Alexander, 2000.

^{xvi} For an examination of Asian gangs in the media, see Alexander, 2000.

^{xvii} . The inspiration behind this gang culture has an interesting trajectory as facets have been taken from the romanticised gangs of American wild-west movies, many of which were in turn, influenced by Asian culture through Japanese films such as the Seven Samurai.

^{xviii} Paul Gilroy argues this position succinctly in *Between Two Camps*, 2000.

5

The Appropriation of 'black' codes by Asian Youth in Birmingham

"What they want," said Millat, "is to stop pissing around wid dis hammer business and jus' get some semtex and blow de djam ting up, if they don't like it, you get me? Be quicker, innit?"

"Why do you talk like that?" snapped Irie, devouring a dumpling.
"That's not your voice. You sound ridiculous!"

'White Teeth'
Zadie Smith (2000)

5.1 Introduction

In this chapter, the notion of 'Asians who act black' is unpacked. The appropriation of African-American culture by South Asian youth and its incorporation into a broader South Asian identity is examined through the narrations of the adults I interviewed. Through this, some of the concepts discussed in previous chapters are grounded in the everyday experiences of Asian people who lived through this cultural moment.

The chapter is divided into five sections, each examining a specific aspect of their involvement with black codes. The first section details their *involvement* with black popular culture; which facets they became involved with and at what stage in their lives (in terms of age and circumstances). This is intended to provide insight into some of the products marketed as part of a 'black' lifestyle. It also intimates the ways in which adolescent identities are forged through experimentation, as this was the stage at which interviewees became involved.

The second section examines the impact of this consumption and the ways in which it *influenced* them. It also looks at the channels by which African-American culture arrives to Asian youth, through global media and through the more local connections of families and friends.

Section three looks at the *investment* that interviewees made during adolescence and asks questions about those codes which are transferable and easy to appropriate and those which do not traverse so well along the journeys of global consumption.

How this consumption has shaped the interviewees, their thinking and their overall sense of self is examined in the fourth section on *identity*.

The fifth and final section, *(in)visibility* concerns the way in which these facets of their identities were performed and frames it within the wider issue of the problematic visibility of Asian youth, as discussed in the previous chapter.

The interview transcripts are quoted at length to allow readers to give a clearer perception of the interviewees' views and experiences.

Previous research I have conducted at undergraduate level established the use of African-American culture by Asian youth on a wide-scaleⁱ. Here I examine, through interview narratives, reflections by adults on their use of black codes during their adolescence.

5.2 Involvement

Amongst the Asian youth I interviewed the attraction to hip-hop culture was evident; they spoke about it with a passion. Naila stated:

"I like the music, I like the dancing, the dress sense, even the stereotypes of black people, to me that was appealing. ...the whole thing about black culture, there's something strong about it." **[Naila]**

The level of their involvement in facets of hip-hop and black American culture has varied; Ali was so involved that he had a 'set'; a gang with his own tag and gang name. Alongside friends he was involved in producing hip-hop music through MC-ing or DJ-ing as well as dancing and graffiti.

For all of the interviewees their interest had been intensive during the period of adolescence.

The music they grew up listening to ranged from R 'n' B, to chart style rap to hardcore hip-hop and their interest and involvement with this ranged from listening to tracks mainly with their friends, to making the music or distributing and promoting gigs themselves, to buying into a whole gangsta lifestyleⁱⁱ. This involvement manifested itself at a day-to-day level as listening to and more importantly collecting the music and going to clubs or dance events. The black codes ranging across different texts were neatly stated by Ajunta as she describes an aspect of hip-hop cultures she consumes:

"I'm into boys in the hood films, ...or gangsta films, I was into that, I enjoyed it because the music came with it; I always bought soundtracks, because I knew the music was going to be good, like bootie call, even Malcolm X and all those sort of things, a lot of controversy." **[Ajunta]**

Ajunta outlines the way in which the music has led to an expansion into the film industry using the same ingredient used to sell rap -popular musical artists; iconography; controversy and makes clear the way in which this consumption took place across a range of texts.

5.2.1 Clothes and Labels

Clothes were another text on which black codes were heavily inscribed. They form a crucial part of the visual imagery of hip-hop culture and became part of the industry, as companies such as Nike, Tommy Hilfiger, and Adidas began to target to the urban market. Even catwalk designers flirted with it for a while (see Hatfield, 2001; Gordon, 2001). In response to this, black owned companies sprung up, supported by hip-hop stars who realised they could cash in on their own images, rather than be employed merely to front white owned companiesⁱⁱⁱ. For Asian youth adopting black codes, the clothes

became an important part of this appropriation, and particularly valuable as a visible and thus clear signal of their affiliations.

“I used to wear baggy khakis with my white t-shirt and I used to wear, cos we took our influence from Krips, right, cos that’s what everybody used to do –so even if we didn’t mean it, we just took it. So I would wear like a blue checked shirt, and I’d just do the top button, and just leave the rest, and on my feet I used to wear, I used to have this pair of Nikes, a pair of canvas... And silver jewellery.” **[Ali]**

The adoption of black codes by Asian youth was at times considerable, even when unintentional; as Ali explains, without recognising it, they affiliated themselves to the krips gang. An important part of this urban uniform was designer labels:

“The only label I used to wear was kickers, but that was cos of the money, if I’d had the money, oh yeah, I’d buy all the labels, I woulda bought all the labels.” **[Naila]**

It has been noted (by Baker, 1993) that the label culture of the eighties, with designer labels becoming increasingly prominent as symbols of status/wealth, was an important part of hip-hop culture, and a facet that was adapted by Asian youth appropriating these black codes.

“I always wore a cap when I was round my area, dark clothing, baggy jeans, trainers.” **[Aftab]**

Aftab who grew up in the areas of Handsworth and Ladywood, makes clear that this style of clothing was specific to a place: his area. It differs not only from his school crowd where his friend were different; but also from the private sphere of the home. It seems that a significant aspect of the clothing was not just a teenage interest in fashion, but a way to ‘be’ in urban spaces.

5.2.2 Car Culture

Cruising in cars was a vital related aspect of the appropriation of black codes taken up by Asian youth in general. This car culture aspect amongst Asian youth has been noted in Alexander, 2000; Gillespie, 1995; as well as several television programmes and newspaper articles^{iv}. It is also a recognisable feature of African-American urban culture, and rap lyrics and videos are littered with references to jeeps and cars^v. Cruising in cars enabled Asian youth to check out girls, display music, and flaunt material possessions.

"My friends had cars, they learnt very early. We did use to hang out by people's cars; I know it sounds silly...We used to make a point actually. Vocally. Our friend would come to the class and say 'd'you want a lift home...in my car... that I can drive?' (Laughs)" **[Amit]**

"...I dunno how many amps he's got, you know, he's got two 12 CD auto-tunes, and we were like playing it, and ... we're cruising about thirty, and you know some kid comes along, some idiot comes along, and he thinks he's a gangsta just cos he's wearing a baseball cap. ...this guy comes along with his 'boom, boom boom' ^{vi}system, and we just blew him away playing 'Cop Killer' really loud, ...this guy just went from thinking he was a bad boy to a shrivelled to a sad case." **[Ali]**

Ali also demonstrates the ways in which the combination of cars and music allowed for a marking out of space, in a distinctively masculine and territorial way. Cruising and car culture were discussed in five of the nine interviews. Four of these were with male interviewees, who appropriated these aspects in a particularly masculine way, as can be seen in Ali's narration above. Ali narrates the story in the present tense, to enliven the encounter with a younger Asian person who is listening to dance music. Ali goes on to recount later, the ways in which younger Asians who are into dance music have not understood the ways in which much of it is derivative of hip-hop culture.

An important part of this narration was an enumeration of the features that his friends' BMW had, which demonstrated his know-how in the situation, but also the significance of these car features in this macho encounter. It appears from interviews, but most obviously from observation, that these public encounters were an important aspect of car cultures. It was made clear in interviews that this facet was a public consumption.

"...when we listened to music, we would all listen to it together. I mean we used to trade secrets, family secrets. We used to get high on drugs, and we used to sit in cars, with the music and just chill on a weekend." **[Jaz]**

This quote highlights the way in which cars functioned as social spaces and places for public display for this subset of south Asians. It also points to the way in which the lack of public spaces for Asians to use, made cars an important function, not merely for independence, or a demonstration of material wealth but literally as a leisure space and a space away from the policed community spaces.

5.2.3 City Spaces

Asian youth were highly marked out in Birmingham City centre for the spaces they used. From my observations between 1997-1999, and common knowledge, the Central Library in Chamberlain square, the Pallasades and the McDonalds and later, the growing number of coffee franchises that shot up in the city centre were frequented. From previous research, I found that the visibility of Asian youth in these spaces was clearly noted; and there was institutional anxiety around this. The concentration of Asian youth in specific spaces, and their visibility, implies the way in which the multicultural city, depicted through the imagery of the melting pot, is actually hugely sub-

divided. It also suggests a lack of leisure and social spaces available to young South Asians.

5.2.4 Organising Events

For some of the interviewees, their involvement went beyond consumption to active production of aspects of a lifestyle, for example, promoting and selling music. Naila promoted for events in Birmingham and London, including nights by Radio 1 R 'n' B DJ, Trevor Nelson^{vii}.

Jai organised events and nights incorporating 'urban' music such as garage and hip-hop. However, he felt there were discouraging obstacles to this:

"In Birmingham, the police just don't wanna work with Black or Asian event organisers, and we're constantly in touch with the police, saying this is what we're gonna do, we're giving you three weeks notice, we'd like some co-operation. If they do it for the white football matches, why can't they do it for the black events?" **[Jai]**

This quote demonstrates the ways in which a unity becomes forged between black and Asian events and between shared experiences. Whilst talking about those experiences he continues to draw analogies between black and Asian experiences. Black and Asian events in shared spaces, as well as furthering the creation of a black public sphere, heighten an awareness of similar experiences as Jai found through trying to elicit police cooperation for organised events.

Involvement with transported forms of black American culture is something that some of the interviewees eventually drifted out of. During the time of their involvement, some were also into Asian music scenes, though it became usurped by their interest in 'black' music and scene. During the late eighties to early nineties, significant changes, such as the emergence of MTV and

films depicting African-American lives were occurring (see chapter 3). This became an important part of what was available for youth consumption at the time, and still forms a major part of youth culture and consumption today.

5.3 Influences

As black American culture was a key influence on the development of urban South Asian youth cultures, and in particular, on a subsection of Asian youth, it is important to examine the mode of arrival of codes of blackness, and in particular, how they come to influence individuals.

Influential figures in the lives of the interviewees during their adolescence included musical artists. For example, Ali was a big fan of Ice-T and had read a lot about him as well as enjoying his music, and Naila showed her admiration for a number of R 'n' B stars such as Alliyah and Usher; Jai was keen to show his support for Asian artists such as Fun-Da-Mental and Asian Dub Foundation, who had been influenced by the tenets of hip-hop. Other figures who were influences on interviewees were Malcolm X (Ali, Jamal, Ajunta) and Martin Luther King (Ajunta). In the previous phase of research with younger South Asians in Birmingham, I found that Tupac and the Notorious B.I.G. were not only influences, but a daily subject matter as details from satellite documentaries on their deaths were passed around and the limitless permutations on the cause of their death were discussed. It seems clear then, that popular media, in particular, satellite television was influential in South Asian youth's appropriation of Black codes.

5.3.1 Media

There was a recognition that a certain form of access exists to black culture through these contemporary media. Most of the interviewees had access to MTV and had grown up watching the spate of television situation comedies with African-American casts that began to be aired on British television, after the success of the *Cosby* show^{viii}. Codes circulated in the music and television programmes were popular and accessible, and were quickly taken up by young Asians. As Rachna stated,

“You don’t have to be in the company of black people, to be listening to the music, to be dressing like them, acting like them.” **[Rachna]**

However, when I refer to media influences, I do not mean to suggest a simplistic form of consumption is taking place in which young Asians have watched black Americans on television and copied stylistic features, but that the circulation of these images is a pre-requisite. For example, some of the interviewees, particularly the older ones, took on black codes in the company of young British African-Caribbeans, who were also consuming black American forms. The images circulating in the media may not in themselves become influential until they become rooted. A black American influence might then have to be re-performed on British television before it gets taken up; for example, an act like Destiny’s Child may appear on MTV countless numbers of times, but it is only when they appear on *Top of the Pops* and elicit British media coverage that they become listened to on a large-scale and their styles and linguistic terms (such as *bootylicious*) get re-circulated. Alternatively, some media phenomenon might have to be introduced to a young person by their peer group and become part of a larger peer group consumption before

it can be said to be influential. The way in which they were introduced to a specific black code could indicate the level of involvement they then went on to make. For example, if they listen to a Jay-Z single at a regular club in the company of close friends, it might become more significant to them than if they were to encounter it through an MTV programme. Thus the influences on their adoption of black codes needs examination.

5.3.2 Peer Group

Some of the interviewees grew up listening to Black American music in a culturally mixed peer group of Asians and British Afro-Caribbean's either through their neighbourhood (Ajunta, Aftab) or through college peer groups (Ali, Rachna, Jaz, Jai).

"I was brought up with it, I was brought up around black people, I was always, always liked it, but nowadays, its fashion." **[Ajunta]**

"The majority of people in my college were black, and I suppose, you get a way into life, where, if you interact with these people everyday, you suddenly are into the same things they're into." **[Rachna]**

Others, particularly the younger interviewees, grew up listening to it in an almost exclusively Asian peer group (Naila, Amit, Jamal). It seems the proximity to Afro-Caribbeans who were consuming African-American products frequently engaged Asian youth with it also^{ix}. However, as hip-hop became increasingly available, produced for mass consumption, Asian youth could access it without being in mixed company. Sharing spaces with black people remained important as shared spaces and life experiences gave legitimacy to South Asian use of black codes.

"...the white students ...came from the near area, and the Asians were quite a long way, and you have to walk about half an hour from the 'ghetto' to the college ...it was kind of like an invasion as well, and you'd see Asians walking across the common... We were segregated, definitely a segregated population. Not integrated in any way." **[Amit]**

Here, in the context of a discussion on how the Asian students at his school would consume and display 'black' codes, Amit self-consciously points to the ways in which the structural situation of South Asians in his area, in terms of economic position, which placed them in the poorer areas of the town he grew up in, and in terms of being and becoming 'constructed' as separate from the white students, became a factor in the ways they were influenced by and used rap and black musical forms. Therefore, they would employ black codes to perform a more self-assertive group identity.

"I think there was a bit of posturing, I did act a bit macho, ...I didn't change how I thought of myself."

-"Was this a public thing or also in the private sphere of your home life?"

"Definitely not a private thing, definitely public. ...I'm sure we all did come across as being slightly more comfortable. It does give you a bit of confidence." **[Amit]**

He agrees that this posturing was reserved for such public and exposing spaces as did other interviewees, however this does not mean that some consumption of black American forms did not take place in the family sphere.

5.3.3 Family

The significance of peer group influence on young people's use of music is to be expected, however, surprisingly, the influence of family began to slowly emerge once interviews were analysed. Not only the influence of older

siblings, but also a general sharing between brothers sisters and cousins, as a separate sphere to that of parents.

“When it first kicked off was when I was in Canada, I listened to it there because my cousin’s were into it.” **[Jamal]**

“We got them^x out on video and watched them at home. ... I come from a big family, I’ve got two brothers and six sisters, so it’s massive... if I never had a track, my bother would have it.” **[Naila]**

It’s clear from Naila’s interview then, that in terms of influences on her consumption of R ‘n’ B, her family is more significant than her friends, and her consumption of it, is much more woven into the daily fabric of life for her, than for other interviewees, such as Ali and Rachna, for whom it was entirely separate from their family life. For them, the family was an influence in another sense; consuming African-American mediated culture was for them about developing an identity away from the family sphere; a key phase of adolescent life. The ways in which their interest was developed through an investment in aspects of African-American mediated culture is examined below.

5.4 Investment

What took the interviewees appropriation of black codes beyond a superficial consumption was their personal investment in particular facets of it. It seems important to examine how they felt they had gained certain things such as confidence out of this investment, but also to look at what they felt they could legitimately invest in, as this says something about when and where black codes are transferable.

5.4.1 Confidence

In discussions about what they gained from their participation or involvement with facets of hip-hop culture, the female interviewees all frequently mentioned the confidence that the music and the dancing gave them.

Rachna stated:

“That’s probably where I got a lot of my confidence from. ...They are very confident people.” **[Rachna]**

“When I was younger... I was extremely shy, yeah I was one of those back of the class girls, y’know just do my work, don’t want the teacher to ask me a single thing... I used to see people and think ‘they’re so loud and so proud, why can’t I be like that? But I’ve never wanted to be black.” **[Naila]**

Although clearly stating that she did not want to be black, by stating this at the end of a statement of qualities she desired, Naila appears to associate these qualities with ‘blackness’. The masculinized stereotypes of African-Caribbeans have become interwoven with the confident stance displayed in hip-hop culture^{xi}. Amit too added that rap music gave him confidence.

“It does give you a bit of confidence, especially when you listen to gangsta rap and you walk along the street with your friends and you think you’re a big man.” **[Amit]**

Here, it is about a public display of confidence phrased sometimes through aggression and displaying a macho stance. We will return to this when examining ‘attitude’.

5.4.2 Social Life

An enlivened social life was a gain for many of the interviewees. This is partly because it coincided with university or a new phase at school for some of the interviewees. Naila, whose newfound freedom at university allowed her to

explore facets of urban life and diversify her interest in black music, to clubbing and promoting:

“My whole social life revolves around it in a way”. **[Naila]**

Others also found it expanded their social life, though one female interviewee, Ajunta, had a circle composed of mainly black friends. She had gained, out of her investment in hip-hop and black codes, a space away from the community she belonged to.

“When I do go to these clubs, the Asian guys are still, ‘what are you doing drinking?’ ‘What are you doing..’ And it’s like ‘scuse me! Who are you to tell me what to do? Piss off! But when a black guy talks to me, they don’t judge me by nuthin’. They just say ‘how are you? What you doing? Have a conversation with them.” **[Ajunta]**

The space it gave her during her adolescence onwards to explore and experiment unpoliced was linked to her adoption of black cultural codes. However, it was affected by a sense of guilt, which increased her sense of being policed

“You don’t feel bad doing all the bad stuff that I do. With an Asian I feel bad. You go into a shop to buy a packet of cigarettes, I think ‘Oh God!’” **[Ajunta]**

The fear of how the Asian shopkeeper, as standard bearer of the community perceived her, affected her sense of right and wrong. Thus the distance gained through involvement with other cultural forms allowed her to partake in habits perceived as being more attuned with that culture.

5.4.3 A global Islam

Many African-Americans in the sphere of hip-hop production have various associations with the nation of Islam, and this meant that the interviewees

felt they had a legitimate connection to the music; they had a stronger claim to it.

Half of the interviewees' religious background was Muslim and for them there seemed to be a particular affinity with African-American culture. Indeed from previous research I have done with a much bigger sample, I have also found this to be the case. One of the things that the Rushdie affair highlighted is the notion of a global Islam. Ahmed and Donovan (1994:34) argued that the Rushdie affair and the gulf war foregrounded the way in which Muslim communities in Britain valorized their religious identity above that of their national or local identities. To quote Stuart Hall, the 'strategic retreat to more defensive identities in response to the experience of cultural racism' (Hall 1992:35) is a signal of the status of British Muslims. For younger Muslims this may not be a retreat to the traditional Islam of their grandparents and parents but to a more politicised Islam that puts race at the centre of its concerns: i.e. the Nation of Islam. To quote Ali:

"The different sort of attitude, in terms of why Asians go for that sort of music, from my experience really, that sort of Black Nationalist, NOI [Nation of Islam] thing and 'do for self' and basically Malcolm X." **[Ali]**

When asked if his parents knew about his interest in hip-hop and gang culture, he replied by making the Islamic link:

"The thing is, by the time public enemy came out, it was like- the thing is, it depends on where you come from. If you're like Asian, but you're Muslim, then obviously your connections... If you listen to public enemy, then its obvious you know, nation of Islam...they have that thing of 'do for self' and that." **[Ali]**

This 'do for self' attitude, i.e. relying on your own resources and the ability to defend yourself, is attractive to many Asian youth and in particular males, for reasons that are rooted in their local circumstances. As Ali went on to state:

"That statement has been used so many times 'take them to the cemetery' you know which is true. At the end of the day, I heard it and it made sense. Why should people get beaten up for no apparent reason and you're not going to defend yourself? But 'cause of what was happening- I was bought up in the Midlands." **[Ali]**

The ideology appealed because of the local circumstances that many Asians, particularly in the poorer neighbourhoods, found themselves in. It is also rooted in national circumstances in that the stereotype of the passive Asian was until recently heavily propagated in the British media. Consuming hard, hyper-masculine African-American forms such as gangsta, or hardcore rap could allow the notion of the passive effeminate, Asian male to be contested. The appropriation of African-American culture could challenge the cultural binarism that prevails in Britain, in which, to quote Banerjea and Banerjea, "narratives of black masculinity, sit alongside ideas of unmasculine Asian men" (Banerjea & Banerjea, 1996:109). Rachna described the phenomenon as she saw it:

"There's a respectable Asian guy and a bad boy Asian guy and the bad boy Asian guy is [in broad accent] 'you know, its me innit? I'm the guy on the street, you wanna hang out with me, innit?...". **[Rachna]**

Through consuming African-American cultural forms, the notion of 'the passive Asian' is contested.

5.4.4 Attitude

Over half of the interviews frequently mentioned 'attitude'. 'Attitude', was not always an aggressive stance, but sometimes referred to confidence, and

sometimes to an indescribable quality, as in 'black people just have that attitude'. A further probe into what was meant by 'attitude' led to Jai describing it as analogous to those that are identified in punk music.

"They're saying to the crowd 'this is what I'm about'. And that attitude, comes from like almost a 'Fuck you, this is what I'm into.' Attitude.... The attitude that a lot of the hip hop artists had was like a (knocks table) this is what I'm doing, this is what I'm about, y'know. Take it or leave it. People could actually relate to it I think." **[Jai]**

"I'd say a lot of Asians have this attitude. ... And when you watch TV from America, and videos, it's all about attitude. Like basically, trying to be don kind of thing." **[Jamal]**

These two quotes highlight the two facets of the notion of attitude as expressed in interviews. Jamal's demonstrates giving the appearance of fearlessness. Jai's is much more about self-assertion and marking the space to be yourself.

Jamal, a football fan, described the appeal of this attitude using an analogy:

"It's just the attitude, it's just something different, it felt more fitting. Like with football, I watch football all the time, I support arsenal. You got Ian Wright, who's got all this attitude, and gives it all this that, and you've got your typical person, like Paul Merson, he just does nothing. That's what I guess is the whole attraction of it." **[Jamal]**

Amit also highlights here that there are few Asian role models that are appealing to youth. Therefore, of the role models available, black sports stars and entertainers, appeal not just to Asian youth but to a cross-band of youth everywhere. The lack of Asian role models in youth entertainment and sport reflect the fact that these professions are generally not valorized in Asian communities, therefore Asian youth look to several different sources, including diasporic Asian cultural products as well as 'black' culture. There is a considerable black presence in the entertainment and sports industries,

which not only reinforces stereotypes, but 'inversely affects the distribution of black validation in other professions' (Hewitt, 1986:216). Nonetheless it does reflect some glory on to black communities, especially in the eyes of young people who are interested in these industries.

Amit stated more openly than others what black American culture gave to Asian youth:

-“What attracted you to hip-hop and related aspects...?”

“I think it was the fact that it was cool. That’s, growing up in England as an Asian, you become aware, acutely aware, at a very early age that your culture is not ‘cool’. And from what you hear of music, and the way that your parents are and your family dress and just how we act, the image of Asians, is very uncool, and when you grow up, you wanna be cool.” **[Amit]**

This suggests that one of the reasons Asian youth may have such a strong investment in the notion of attitude is because of the association with ‘black’ cool and thus counteract the image of Asian as passive, uncool, regressive, and it becomes more effective when enacted through a group stance.

“It does give you a bit of confidence, especially when you listen to gangsta rap and you walk along the street with your friends and you think you’re a big man.” **[Amit]**

5.4.5 Language

The Asian youth I spoke to adopted black codes through their style of clothing, the music they listened to, the activities they became involved in such as cruising in cars and DJ-ing, even physical gesture and the ‘walk’^{xii}. However, language was more problematic. Language is not transferable in the same way as clothes and music and there was clearly an awareness of that. The Ali G character highlights this through humour, as one of the

reasons that the character is funny is because he is adopting black culture to the extreme, but also because he is employing black language codes which makes the character's appropriation appear extreme^{xiii}. Ironically, in creating the Ali G character, Baron-Cohen made the language codes more acceptable to use as they became increasingly exposed. None of my interviewees admitted to using what they perceived as black language, however, many admitted they used words and phrases that could be perceived as being black, but insisted they were common lexicon amongst youth, terms such as 'flexing' and 'allow it'. Naila for example stated that 'I don't try and talk black' but then admitted that if she's with a person who's in the scene, "I'll talk more 'in'". However, Naila, like a few of the other interviewees, could name people who took that investment in black culture to the extreme, and this was often demonstrated through their language.

"I know people that do act black and talk black and, when I see them, I know some people that take the piss out of them." **[Naila]**

Early on, in the chapter^{xiv}, I show how Naila enumerates the things that are available to appropriate like a shopping list; however, at this stage, she reveals that language is not somehow 'up for grabs'.

Rachna also embarrassedly admitted that when she first got into it:

"Um, I used to, I always used to talk in the patois, as a joke or whatever, and my family would say, you're not black don't talk like that." **[Rachna]**

Here she is keen to point out that it was 'as a joke' that she used black speech codes. Youth cultures create themselves through coded language that binds groups of people together in a speech community. a linguist, Montgomery states,

“The sense of solidarity between members of the subculture is heightened and maintained; and their frequently illicit dealings can remain semi-confidential, even when conducted in relatively public places, such as the club, bar or street.” **[Montgomery, 1995:98]**

Black American terms are packed into other languages or sub-languages to create an anti-language^{xv}. This is understood implicitly by people, who attach a positive value to being a part of a group of anti-language users, whether they are involved in ‘illicit’ activities or not. However, there is clearly a discomfort to using African-American language codes as they are perceived as much more anchored to their roots. This has led to the use of black codes in speech marks, particularly for those who feel most removed from it. Amit states:

“we’d call each other G or we’d say, use phrases like ‘For real’ but we’d do it ironically, so people know we weren’t actually trying to speak like African-Americans. I know some people do, but we never did.” **[Amit]**

There is still a desire to occupy that semantic space; but an awareness that it is a transgression.

5.5 Identity

‘Appropriation’ suggests more than simple use, consumption or even a mimicking, it’s about becoming constituted by something. This chapter grounds the interplaying world processes I look at, at the level of individual identities. Like lightening, these global mediated cultural codes do not have any power until they ground themselves somewhere; that is, they become important when they are narrated and recreated at an individual level.

Madun Sarup states in his book on Identity that-

“Consumption is a mode of being, a way of gaining identity, meaning and prestige in contemporary society.” **[Sarup, 1996:105]**

He also points out that consumer goods requires ‘a vast labour to ...master their use’ (Sarup, 1996:105) and this is clear from some of the interview transcripts above. However, the ways in which the appropriation of black codes is incorporated into individuals identities is important to examine.

Through their consumption the interviewees seemed to gain new sets of friends (Ali, Rachna), what seemed like a life-long bond with black musical forms (Ali, Jai) a sense of confidence (Rachna, Naila, Ajunta, Amit), Politicisation (Amit, Jamal) or a space for adolescent experimentation (Aftab, Jamal) and participation in a globally recognised youth culture.

5.5.1 Class

The appropriation of black codes have been noted in Asian cities such as Bradford, Birmingham and parts of London with a predominantly Muslim population. Earlier, I examined the ways in which Islamic ties could allow Muslim youth to make certain connections with Nation of Islam rappers. However another connection between Bengali and Pakistani youth of Muslim descent and hip-hop culture is class position. The deprivation nihilism and ghettoised circumstances that are rapped about are perhaps factors that Lower class Asians can identify with (see chapter 4 for a discussion of class position of Bengali and Pakistani Asians). This was noted by the interviewees I spoke to and has been referred to by other writers (Alexander, 2000; Ali, 1998).

“I would say Bengalis more than Indians take on black Afro-American culture... I’ve learnt this from the workshops, that I do, a lot of the

Bengali kids... If you look at the dress sense and if you look at the way they talk it's very, very hip-hop orientated" **[Jai]**

Referring to racism, Rachna states;

If you're as clever as someone, or pretty as someone, you won't experience it, but if you're just the donnest Asian as it is, and you're just the streetwise kid, it will affect you, no doubt about it. **[Rachna]**

Rachna points to the cross-section of race and class and gender as a significant factor in the ways in which a person will experience racism, as well as their educational achievement (perhaps class). Although less clearly stated in interviews, the appropriation of Black codes have been adopted in a very spatially demarcated way, which is the result of the class position of Asians in British society, and those disproportionately affected tend to be from Bangladeshi and Pakistani communities (Modood, 1997)

5.5.2 Gender

It was generally acknowledged that the ways in which African-American culture was appropriated were demarcated by gender.

Males were seen as appropriating signs of blackness to a greater extent. However, female interviewees were more articulate about what they gained from it. The aspects of hip-hop culture appropriated that were linked to a conspicuous consumption were associated with males much more than females, and this is partly because the females were 'turned off' by some of the misogynistic aspects of hip-hop culture, but perhaps also because Male Asians at that stage had much more to invest in an assertion of masculinity in the face of emasculating stereotypes and the threat of racial violence.

5.5.3 Race

I found that some of the participants referred to racial markers and cultural boundaries particularly towards the end of the interviews, often as conclusive statements. Rachna spoke in the rhetoric of racial harmony when she stated:

"I haven't seen any direct racism to me... it really gets your goat, because you get to the point where you think, hang on, we all bleed the same, ...we all spit, we all do the same thing in the same way, we're only human." **[Rachna]**

However, towards the end of the interview she contradicts her earlier statement by saying:

"I've not experienced that [racism] myself, those things interest me because...there's a differentiation between white and black, and it will always be there, its never gonna fade and..."

- "Where do we fit into that?"

"At the end of the day we're black. We're not white. And, regardless of if you're black Caribbean or Asian or Gujarati, or Sikh or Hindu, Muslim, you're a black and that's the be all and the end all of it." **[Rachna]**

Other interviewees followed in a similar vein; Naila stated:

"And so the only thing we did have as Asians was black music, because we're all ethnic minorities at the end of the day yeah?" **[Naila]**

In a cultural setting where race is still seen in terms of the black and white binary, it is easier for Asians to ally themselves with 'black' because of the experiences that are shared with other minority groups. Another respondent using the fatalistic expression 'At the end of the day' was talking about Asian youth's investment in hip-hop but related it to his difficulties in the job market.

"At then end of the day, the urban struggle, to be street...and it's about how Asians relate to the struggle thing. At the end of the day... doesn't matter how much somebody tries, it's like the next job I'm

gonna [try to] get, if I really think about it, it's like what they want; what they picture." **[Ali]**

The shared experiences in important facets of everyday life such as employment creates the situation in which Asians can draw upon 'black' (African-American) codes to create a South Asian youth identity without being especially marked out for it, as white youth often are.

There was also a feeling amongst interviewees that as well as it being natural to identify with black people more, that white society also viewed Asians as part of a lumped together group of minorities; thus suggesting that the binary was ingrained into British society.

"Oh yeah they don't even think twice; like 'oh yeah, it's the same'. People even sometimes, white people feel bad calling us Asians they just call us, when there's two classes as black and white, we come under black, we're not white." **[Ajunta]**

5.5.4 Moving On

One of the factors identified as indicating a growing out of that phase, was a return to their 'own' culture. A recognition of the significant differences between black friends and their lives, and between the 'experimental' and the 'grounded'.

"We're taught about slavery in schools. We're not taught about Gandhi in schools or anything like that... I'm grown up now, and I do want to know my own culture rather than anything else." **[Ajunta]**

Just as their paths towards their interest in Black culture differed, so too did their journeys along it. The ways in which the influence of black culture helped shape their identities changed with time. It seemed to be strongest during adolescence and tended to decrease as they are into adulthood- though this was not always the case (Jai, Naila). Identity is contextual, and

fluctuating and what seemed important to assert at one time in their life (their allegiance to a broader youth culture) is superceded by something else (such as a recognition of the significance of their own Asian identities within the overall 'black').

5.6 (In) visibility

The hyper-visibility of Black masculinity as described by Herman Gray (1995), hides a much more profound invisibility (West, 1993 – in Alexander), this reinscribed hyper-masculinization prevents other images of Asian masculinity coming to the fore, so that they are trapped between the dualistic modes of the older more *traditional* stereotypes of passive and the newer aggressive ones that leave little space for ambiguities. The issue of visibility as a metaphor for understanding Asian communities in Britain has been highlighted in chapter 4. Here, I wish to examine the ways in which Asian young people performed their public identities, constituted by 'black' codes, gained from mediated forms of African-American culture.

5.6.1 Street

The metaphor of the 'street' appeared in the interviews and is all too familiar from a range of images of invoked in connection to African-American culture. The notion of who owns the streets will be specific to particular localities, but it is clearly linked to urban spaces and communities with deprivation. It is also linked, through an understanding of the public and private sphere and their functions, to masculinities. Therefore, black masculinity, which carries with it both the burden of a hyper-masculinized and an urban deprivation

image, is clearly linked to 'the street'. As a space constructed through crime, deviancy and threat, it has policy implications for control and supervision. Therefore, it naturalizes the link between the need to supervise and police black masculinity.

5.6.2 Gangs

'Hip-hop is a way of life' according to Ali. His belonging to a gang that almost became like a family to him, reaffirmed this view, as it became the ethos of the group he belonged to. Others also enacted their use of black cultures out in a group.

"You don't realise it at the time, that you are acting in a group mentality, or behaving as a group, but we'd sit around at lunchtime, the ten/twelve of us, and we used to put the music on, and then we'd get complaints from teachers and white students saying, will you stop doing this, and it made us more determined to do it anyway, and kind of we were like, the main thing was that we were playing hip-hop".
[Amit]

Later, Amit outlined the ways in which others, particularly authority figures, conceptualised them as a group:

"Like the newspaper report was suggesting, we were trying to act, that we were trying to appear in numbers to intimidate, and it's just not true, because if you have, like in any social environment like a college, you have people who know other people, and like, different groups will congregate in the same places and that's only natural and just because you happen to be Asian, doesn't mean that you're acting as a group unit, you're just inhabiting the same social space. I'm sure that if there were white people, it wouldn't have made- it wouldn't have the same impact." **[Amit]**

In his mostly white school, Amit and friends and other Asians were constructed as a group, and through this labelling^{xvi} soon came to see themselves as a group as can be seen in the earlier quote. Alexander states that:

“Interwoven throughout the evocation of ‘the gang’ is a less explicit assertion of the racialised basis of collective identity. It is this raced identity that becomes paramount, obscuring alternative formulations around gender, age, territory, friendship or indeed their more fluid divisions or solidarities. **[Alexander, 2000]**

What Alexander found interesting was the ways in which the young men of her study used similar articulations themselves. A group identity understood through the inscription of race came in useful at the level of everyday lives:

As Aftab states,

“It was very much about respect, being respected on the street, not being feared.” **[Aftab]**

5.6.3 ‘Acting Black’

As in my previous research on this matter I found that the interviewees were able to point to the ways in which others appropriated African-American codes to a much larger extent than they did.

“Oh right, well you get some right mugs, chains hangin’ out, you get SLICK hair, oh god! You get you got your collar up on your denim jacket. Mochino everything DNG labels hangin’ out- there is-blatantly obvious. You go London, honestly!” **[Jamal]**

“In London it used to be crazy, especially in Wembley. We used to go to Wembley with my parents and see people along Ealing road and see these Asians they just looked like, if they don’t turn around, you’d think they were black, the way they walk and the way they’d dressed, it was really stylised”. **[Amit]**

“I think they, do try to ‘act’ black. In certain ways, with their speech and their clothing. ... Especially a lot of males and nowadays females too, with the hairstyles and stuff... actually a lot of white people try to pass themselves as black too. Because its fashionable” **[Ajunta]**

Asians who ‘act’ black are ridiculed because they are seen to be vacating^{xvii} their true ‘Asian’ selves and there is a stigma around vacating our given identities, perhaps because it destabilises the notion of identities as ‘fixed’.

5.6.4 Performance

'Acting black', or the performance and display of black codes, involves attention to detail in terms of having the right product as well as the right brand, and sometimes, to have acquired it through the right means.

"And you come round our area, and there's loads of kids with number one's on their heads, and like, there's the classic things you'd say is the black attitude, which is unfair, but you'd say that." **[Jamal]**

The performance of this 'attitude' is highly visual; it's about standing out through clothes and hair and jewellery, but also through the walk and the gestures and even the 'pose'.

"It's like very Moschino, very mobile phone, turntables, but I don't know where that comes from. I think some of it does come from the hip hop side, the flashy side, but also from the fact that a lot of these, these are second generation / third generation Asians, who have got a little bit more money to flaunt and they'll say 'well we've got it, we want to flaunt it.'" **[Jai]**

The increasing affluence of Asian communities is related to the common sense thinking on 'new money'; i.e., those that have come into wealth, suddenly or by a significant proportion tend to demonstrate their wealth much more, however, some of the performance and display takes place amongst youth who remain in poor deprived areas, and do not necessarily have the material wealth, in this situation it becomes much more about acquiring status through the display; conspicuous consumption.

The stance and display of performing a hip-hop identity was linked to the development of video by Jai, who managed a record shop and by Jaz, both of whom were old enough to remember the pre-music-video days of record buying.

"You used to go "Oh yeah, I heard that record on the radio" Now, when people come in and buy music they say I want that track with that girl in the background with the wonderbra on!" I've had loads of people that come and say, "Have you not seen the video!"**[Jai]**

"I think if it wasn't for music videos, there wouldn't be so much inter-relational development. The kids wouldn't like it that much , ...there wouldn't be the peer pressure at school to wear labels, to be into fashion, street fashion."**[Jaz]**

The visual nature of hip-hop has been remarked on By Gilroy and others; in 'Between Camps' he states:

"the growing dominance of specularity over aurality might be thought of as contributing a special force to representations of the exemplary racial body arrested in the gaze of desiring and identifying subjects"**[Gilroy, 2000:191]**

Vicki Bell has stated in a comment on performance, that sexuality has "a fraught relationship to 'the visual'; that is, because non-heterosexual sexualities have been marginalized and 'assigned to invisibility' a political strategy has been to display temporally highly visible identities (Bell, 1999). Couldn't the same be argued with many of those marginalized in society?

Performance is also relevant to this discussion in another sense, as the discrepancy between the early stereotypes of Asians as passive and hardworking (which now live alongside ones of the riot 'n' gang Asians) and the macho stance of hip-hop cultures are articulated by interviewees:

"I dunno, you'd watch TV and you'd think, you'd look for a role and that, there's not much to follow."**[Jamal]**

"I mean in terms of performance, maybe it's to do with stereotypes or something, people don't really expect Asians people to get up and start doing hip-hop"**[Naila]**

Recognizing the difficulties in joining the entertainment industry that Asians face from 'Families, culture and the rest of it', she also states that although there are many good performers of black musical forms in the Asian community they do not fit the preconceived image:

"Yeah, I mean they're not really performers in any sense are they really? I mean you don't see Asians in the spotlight, in the media anyway, do you? I mean there's a couple of newsreaders, and blue peter has that Asian lady, [laughs]." **[Naila]**

In the face of a lack of viable representations for them, young Asian people draw on a multiplicity of resources, and vibrant forms of youth culture have been created out of many of these, one of the most significant of these have been the ways in which South Asian youth have drawn on hip-hop and African-American mediated codes, and incorporated it as their own.

ⁱ In my undergraduate thesis ('Black is the New Brown': The Appropriation of Black U.S. Culture by South Asian Youth in Britain' Department of Cultural Studies and Sociology, The University of Birmingham) I conducted a survey. I have also conducted research at postgraduate level, not used in this thesis.

ⁱⁱ As depicted in hip-hop culture, for example there were much publicised battles between the East Coast and West coast gangs 'The Krips' and 'the bloods' with which famous rappers such as Tupac Shakur, Biggie and Puff Daddy were affiliated. These gangs were much publicised, and a min-industry flourished around the deaths of Tupac and Biggie.

ⁱⁱⁱ This movement can be seen in the change from Run DMC's release of 'My Adidas' (1986) to Wu Tang-Clan's self-owned Wu Wear (1995)

^{iv} There was a BBC 2 documentary about Southall Asians presented by Melanie Sykes and a channel four video diary style feature also around a couple of years ago.

^v As Will Smith says in 'Miami' (199-) '\$100,000 dollar cars, everybody's got 'em'. Other examples to be found in Public Enemy 'You're Gonna Get Yours' Yo Bum Rush the Show (1987); Coolio 'Mama I'm in Love with a Gangster' from It Takes a Thief (1994)

^{vi} To contextualise, this noise was used as a disparaging way to refer to dance music.

^{vii} Viral marketing, using word-of-mouth is a fairly recent device employed by advertisers to target urban youth, particularly with music events and records.

^{viii} 'A different World' (1987) and 'The fresh Prince of Bel-air' (1990) Moesha (1996), Sister Sister (1994), Hangin' with Mr Cooper (1992), Hammerman (1991), Keenan and Kel (1996).

^{ix} See Hewitt, 1986 for an examination of how language codes get transferred amongst white black and Asian youth.

^x Naila is referring to the spate of basketball-based hollywood films out with black casts.

^{xi} Ironically, the stereotypes of African-Caribbeans in America are akin to those of the passive and middle-class Asian that exist in Britain, and contrast with the masculinized stereotypes of African-Americans. (See Hewitt, 1986).

^{xii} Naila calls it the new shoes walk. It's a strut with sight limp that is associated with African-Caribbean youth as well as African-American ghetto youth.

^{xiii} Sasha Baron Cohen was inspired to create the character by speech patterns he heard on a radio show- Tim Westwood's rap show on Radio 1, where perfectly middle class young people would telephone in using Africa-American language, according to several sources, such as magazines and websites.

^{xiv} The quote I refer to: "I like the music, I like the dancing, the dress sense, even the stereotypes of black people, to me that was appealing. ...the whole thing about black culture, there's something strong about it." [Naila]

^{xv} An anti-language is often described as 'extreme versions of social dialects' and are often said to arise in subcultures and marginal groups. (Montgomery, 1995:96).

^{xvi} According to Becker's labelling theory, 'deviant behaviour is behaviour that people so label' (Becker, 1966) and suggests that people labelled as such come to believe that they are so

^{xvii} Back uses the term 'vacating' as 'the process whereby individuals distance themselves from a particular social definition', (Back, 1996)

6

Conclusion

People had fucked with Rajik back in the days when he was into chess and wore V-necks. People had fucked with Ranil, when he sat at the back of the class and carefully copied all the teacher's comments into his book. People had fucked with Dipesh and Hifan when they wore traditional dress in the playground. People had even fucked with Millat, with his tight jeans and his white rock. But no one fucked with any of them any more because they looked like trouble. They looked like trouble in stereo.

'White Teeth'
Zadie Smith (2000)

6.1 Introduction

The research presented in the previous chapter was conducted in order to examine a specific cultural moment in which the global commercialisation of hip-hop coincided with the coming of age of a generation of Asian youth who felt British and yet who had little visibility in mainstream media. The ways in which Asian youth appropriated African-American codes to recreate what it meant to be Asian and British and urban has implications for wider politics of race and class. A clear sense emerged from the interviews that black codes were used and deployed in the public performance of identity by South Asian youth I spoke to. This was part of a wider appropriation taking place amongst South Asian youth around Britain. I would argue that the ways in which black codes were used by urban Asian youth in Britain was a significant factor in reconfiguring Asian youth culture in Britain. Consumption of musical forms such as rap and R 'n' B; as well as involvement in car culture; commodity displays of mobile phones and labeled clothing; the use of linguistic codes derived from afro-Caribbean and black American culture; these are all factors closely associated with young British South Asians. The representations of Asians in British media have also shifted dramatically, as discussed in chapter 4; it could be argued that this is intertwined with this change in Asian youth culture. I make the connection between this appropriation and newly emerging stereotypes of Asian youth tentatively, as this needs further research.

6.2 Appropriation

The context for this appropriation came about with the commodification of African-American culture and its sale for global consumption. MTV had started to cash in on the realization that hip-hop culture and shows like 'Yo MTV Raps' were hugely popular. Shows like 'A Different World' and 'The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air' came onto British terrestrial television; Malcolm X became a youth icon and 'blackness' was the sign with which a whole new batch of American goods were sold. This coincided with the growing up of a generation of Asian youth who felt very British and yet who had virtually no visibility in the British media, as examined in chapter 4 and 5. There was not much and still is not much that Asian youth can look to on the British media. As Gillespie put it in her study of young South Asians in Southall,

"Since neither British nor Indian media offer representations which they view as acceptable or appropriate, it is perhaps no wonder that they turn to a third, alternative space of fantasy identification" **[Gillespie, 1995:197]**

For the participants of this research, American hip-hop provided this 'third space'. The lack of an Asian presence in the public sphere meant that this appropriation allowed them to participate in a wider culture and widened the range of social identities available to South Asian youth.

6.3 A 'Black' Experience

The people I interviewed spent their youth growing up in different areas; the access to they had to a 'black public sphere' varied. Their consumption of black

popular culture tended to be of an American kind, mediated for global consumption. However, this was influenced by their proximity to black British people and their shared position as ethnic minorities in Britain.

Interviewees avoiding categorizing themselves as 'Black'; they admitted to adopting stylistic markers of African-America, but made it known that they had not transgressed certain invisible boundaries in their 'borrowing'. They were keen to point out that they did not pretend to be black and they demonstrated this in a variety of ways; they used linguistic codes in a limited way, 'as a joke' or 'ironically'. They maintained an awareness of the similarities shared with black people but were aware of the differences too. However, there were points towards the end of interviews when of their own accord, most of the interviewees used phrases like 'at the end of the day, we're all black'.

A political understanding of the shared experiences of ethnic minority communities led to such conclusive statements. This might indicate that 'black' as a political category exists at a folk level. The debate about this category, outlined in chapter 4, indicated that people wanted their differences acknowledged and therefore a categorization of ethnic minorities under black was not useful or politically expedient. However, the options available for identification are wider than just this dualism; research can point to the ways in which much more complex understandings of affiliation between ethnic minorities can emerge. This research suggests that new affiliations that emerged through the use of black codes and commodities created space in

which political links could potentially be forged.

6.4 The Research on Rap

There were plenty of works in the late eighties and the early part of the nineties that looked at rap music and hip-hop culture (Kitwana, 1994; Rose, 1994; Gilroy, 1993; West, 1993, Longhurst, 1995). This was frequently at the level of textual analysis rather than audience research. These studies of rap and hip-hop were nonetheless useful, particularly as they “highlighted the tangible connecting points that link the often inadequate concepts of ‘production’ and ‘consumption’ and illustrated how consumption can *become* production. [Negus, 1999:489]

With rap music there has been an emphasis on it’s syncretiscity(?) or a search for origins; however, there has been little research looking at the audiences... [Gilroy 2000, p.269-270]

This lack of research on the consumers of these musical forms resulted in a number of assumptions being made about rap’s audiences (as white suburban youth –see chapter 3). The recent examinations of rap’s consumers have highlighted the way in which disenfranchised youth are making use of hip-hop culture (Kaya, 1997; Ali, 1998,). Through my own research, I have found that the global forms of hip-hop culture have been appropriated at a local level. The Asian youth I spoke to had made links between hip-hop culture and their own religious affiliations, their class positions, their spatial locations and their positions as ethnic minorities in Britain.

6.5 The Search for Alterity

One of the things this study tried to draw out is what makes these mediated forms of African-American culture so popular amongst youth the world over; a simple explanation would be that the marketing targets this group; however, a key explanation is related to the increasing power of consumer culture in the current global climate. As Celia Lury states,

“Contemporary consumer culture, which is closely tied to the global postmodern culture of which Hall writes displays, in contrast, a fascination with difference. **[Lury, 2001:190]**

Paul Gilroy also states that ‘the glamour of difference sells well’ (Gilroy, 2000:250). However, this fascination with difference has made the marginal central in some ways. As Gilroy States, ‘hip-hop’s marginality is now as official and routinized as it’s over-blown defiance, even if the music and it’s matching life-style are being presented-marketed as outlaw forms.(Gilroy, 2000:180). In the famous words of Gil-Scott Heron, ‘The revolution will not be televised’ (1971), by implication, then, all revolutionary acts that are recorded, edited and broadcast are *incorporated*; their potential power becomes an aesthetic display.

...Hall argues that the fascination with difference in the global postmodern culture is not entirely cynical, but is also an indication that culture has been transformed ‘by the voicing of the margins’. **[Hall, 1992:23 2001:190].**

This fascination with the margin is not a new thing; as Norman Mailer stated in a famous essay on ‘The White Negro’ with regards to the hipster:

“And in the marriage of the white and the black it was the Negro who bought the cultural dowry” **[Mailer, 1959:357]**

In the next sentence, he goes on to explain why.

“Any Negro who wishes to live must live must live with danger from his first day, and no experience can ever be casual to him, no Negro can saunter down a street with any real certainty that violence will not visit him on his walk.” **[Mailer, 1959:357]**

Although written in 1959, Mailer articulates the way in which danger associated with black life, become the alterity that white audiences crave. The rap artists of today have told similar stories about lives lived in danger and through it gained a degree of cultural capital craved by youth. It seems that some Asian youth at once identified with these tales of danger and craved the reified status of ‘authenticity’ that these representations bought to ‘black’ people.

The growing centrality of consumption has amplified the power and attraction of the marginal. The way in which hip-hop is so incorporated and still so cool demonstrates the way in which blackness lends itself as a sign to products as a byword for cool. Perhaps the appropriation of black codes by Asian youth has allowed them to re-mould themselves into a more appealing marginal culture.

6.6 Hybridity, Class and Consumer Culture

In chapter one I explained the ways in which older modes of seeing identity as fixed were replaced in cultural theory with identity as a continuous project. The common sense understanding of identities is as essentialised. However, having engaged with empirical research, it was clear that young people I spoke to were aware of the ways in which their identities were structured and restructured by

processes around them. In discussion about their adolescence, they talked about the ways in which their identities had been reconstituted by their use of black codes and commodities. However, they were aware of the limitations on use of black commodities and codes.

The use of commodities to reconfigure identities was examined in new ethnicities work such as Marie Gillespie's, 'Television, ethnicity and Cultural Change'. Much of these works relied upon a theoretical framework based on the notion of hybridity, in which fluid identities, that could be 'transformed' by the power of commodity. However, power relations determine these transformations¹.

In a recent essay on hybridity, Moreiras stated:

"... the common response invokes hybridity as a counter-concept strong enough to dissolve the dangers of either hegemonic or counter-hegemonic reification and by the same token is able to ground a sufficiently fluid politics of identity/difference that might warrant the cultural redemption of the subaltern" **[Moreiras, 1998:374]**

This invocation of hybridity does not take into account that sometimes, others have the power to fix you; in these situations, it makes sense to fix yourself first, on terms of your own making. As can be seen in chapters three and four, through representation, certain stereotypes have been created of marginal groups in society; Asian youth have been viewed as passive and feminised; the use of black codes has allowed Asian youth to create subjectivities away from these stereotypes.

One of the findings of the research has been the ways in which young South Asians from certain class and certain religion have been more drawn to mediated

forms of African-American culture; this suggests that subjects make links between the commodities consumed and their identities, it is invested with meaning for them. (see chapter 3 for a detailed examination). I believe that a failing of this research is that class has not been examined in a substantial form as it could have. A partial reason for this is that when I began, I did not have the tools with which to explore the class positions of the interviewees I spoke to. Sadly, an idiom of class has all but disappeared out of a much of cultural studies work, particularly in an analysis of youth cultures. It has been deconstructed and interrogated (for its failings with regards to incorporating gender, race nation) out of existence. The ways in which a complex class-based analysis can take place at the subjective level needs to be re-examined.

6.7 Conclusion

Theoretical reading and analysis around the modalities of race, gender, class and Identity as well as the work on hybridity, diaspora, space and consumption have informed this work. This has been supplemented by a study of hip-hop, marketing, representations and media phenomena. However, a more complex understanding of these issues was arrived at through research. In conclusion, therefore, I would like to emphasise the valuable role that research at the level of individuals and communities plays in providing insight into global forces.

¹ **[Footnote:** As writers on neo-colonialism (Sivanandan 1982; Keily and Marfuet, 1998; King, 1991; Barker, 1999) have pointed out, these exchanges are not equal but structured by power relations. In a time when people's heritage is being plundered in very real terms through the commodification of knowledge which allows corporation to patent for themselves the plant and rice of other countries, developed over thousands of years (Shiva, 1998) it is vital not to underplay the structures that determine the flow exchange and use of commodities).

Appendix 1

Interviewees

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

Appendix 2

Questions:

Establishing involvement

What kind of things were you into in your teens?

What aspects of Black American culture were you into?

[Music/TV/Clothes/Speech/Posturing/politics... -Genres, names, products]

What attracted you to it?

Did being involved in one aspect of it, get you interested in others?

Level of involvement

How did you get into it? How old were you when this happened? What was your situation at the time?

Were your friends into it? Was everyone around you into that scene? ['everyone' who?]

How (actively) involved were you in this? How has your involvement changed over time? When were you most involved? Why? [Did they adopt any particular styles, where they were drawn from...]

What did you get out of it?

Identity

To what extent do you felt you actively chose to be into these things?

Did this interest affect how you saw yourself?/ How did it affect your identity? (Anyone else's?)

Did your family/friends have a reaction to you getting into that?

Changes

Are you still interested in those things?

How has your interest changed? Why?

What do you think that this change means?

Do you think Asian youth and the kinds of things they are into now has changed since then? How? Why?

Wrap up

Is there anything that you think we should have talked about that we haven't?

[Go over anything unclear or missed. Summary of interview.]

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